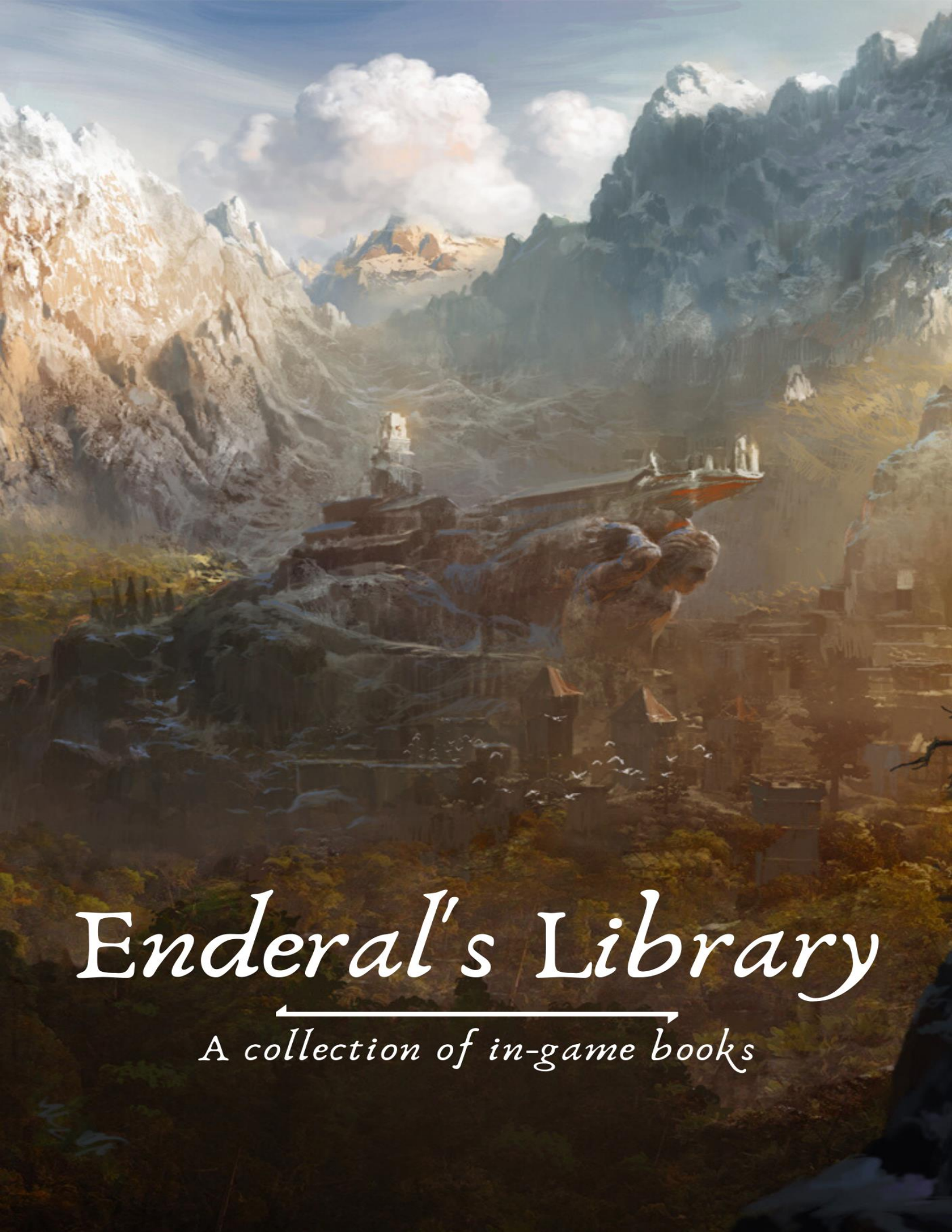
Enderal's Library
A collection of in-game books

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A Village in Turmoil

A wanderer enters the village,
He was a stranger from afar
His coat long and patched a lot,
Casting shadows on his face…

The sun had already set when the stranger entered the tavern and, without inspecting his surroundings the least bit, approached the bar. He leaned forward to the surprised innkeeper and whispered something to him which the other people in the tavern couldn't understand. With a concerned look on his face the innkeeper ordered his wife to take his place for a moment and disappeared together with the stranger in the kitchen.

Just as the wooden door shut, a mutter of voices arose. Farmers, craftsmen and merchants — for all of them, this was a very unusual sight. The old innkeeper used to be very sceptical *[sic]* of strangers, so who could it have been that he trusted him on sight? Who was this tall man with his long coat and his walking stick? After a few minutes the door opened and both went into the main room again. The innkeeper finally stepped in front of the people, his worries already visible in his gaze.

"I need to tell something very important to all of you." He forced himself to stand more upright and cleared his throat. "As I was just informed, here within the village a magical displacement is happening. Wild mages conducted pathless experiments in a nearby cave, which will lead to terrible effects. We have no other choice than to leave this village." The innkeeper did his best to maintain his upright position and to appear calm, but his fear took over.

After a few seconds a carpenter from the back asked: "A magic… what?! What's that supposed to mean?!" The eyes of the innkeeper were bound to the floor. "A magic displacement. Reality lost its path here."

As it became obvious that still nobody really understood, the stranger stepped out of the shadows, stood in front of the innkeeper and spoke with a clear voice to the people: "Magic relies on a structure that holds our world together at its core. Some have the ability to alter this structure, to bend it and stretch it, which is generally known as using magic. To do this, forces from other eventualities are summoned into our reality. But here in this village a split between the realities was created by pathless experiments conducted by those wild mages. Devastating energies and horrid creatures will creep into our world."

The uneasiness filled up the entire room. A villager stood up and asked the stranger: "And… there is nothing we can do? Can't you patch the split somehow?". The stranger, whose face was still covered by the hood of his coat, looked at the floor. "The split widens at the moment, even though due to Malphas' grace no harm has been done by the displacement. Great effort by the arcanists of the Sacred Order is made to keep the displacement confined, but it will probably be impossible to close it entirely. All we can do is trying to keep it from expanding. I am sorry."

The stranger turned to the door, stepped outside, and looked back one last time, his eyes resting on the innkeeper. "Farewell, Mydames and Mysirs. You can still all leave this place and escape a terrible fate. But time runs out." Quickly he turned around, closed the door and faded into the stormy night.

A village in turmoil, what can we do?
The elders have chosen
To stay here, at their home
They will never go.

The young ones are in fear
They prepared to leave
But in love to their elders
They now stopped again

"You stubborn elders, don't you see
The peril can't be turned away
Follow the path of Malphas
And pray to be saved by him…"

About Whisper Tress

Presumably only few travelers or nature lovers won't have noticed the whispers of the wind in the area of Enderal's Sun Coast. If one pauses for a moment and listens to the chimes of wind, one will catch the feeling of not being alone in the scenery. Superstitious people believe in a legend that the whispering sound, which sound so different from the gloomy breath of the Whisperwood and has its roots in its own tale, of the voice of a path-abiding, young woman, who gave her life at the Sun Coast for the cure of her fellow men.

"Grandfather, grandfather, we are bored, can't you tell us one of your stories again", asked the two little children, as they came excitedly into the house. The grandfather, who sat in front of the lit fireplace, turned around and gave them a smile.

"Gladly, which story do you want to hear today?", he asked and pointed besides him, "Sit down beside me."

"The story about the whispering in the trees at the Sun Coast", said one of the children, while they settled with their grandfather. "You are talking about the voice of Lariel, aren't you?", he paused for a short moment to gather his thoughts and then continued: "This is a tale, which is already a few centuries old and which my grandfather told me, like I tell it to you now — today we live here at the coast unburdened and secure, but it wasn't always like that", he furrowed his brow, "once a fatal and unknown sickness ruled here. At first, it only befell the animals and caused them to slowly perish — as if the emerging famine wasn't already bad enough, suddenly also the people in the region fell sick. Apothecarii came from the surrounding villages to help the people, but even they weren't able to fight off the sickness.

Then a young woman named Lariel spoke up, one of the few who wasn't stricken with sickness yet: 'Let me pray to Malphas, I was path-abiding my whole life, maybe I will be able to bring our lord to a merciful mood, so that he may help us.'

Nobody wanted to forbid it, as many had already lost all hope — and so Lariel climbed up a hill, in order to pray there alone in a clearing to Malphas.

Day and night she kneeled there and prayed without cease — she even refused to eat and drink. But there was no sign from Malphas and every day more people died. However, the woman stayed true to her faith and continued to pray.

After ten daybreaks and nightfalls she eventually died of her thirst.

Then, Malphas had mercy and spoke to the last survivors: ‘You were to be judged, since you started to forget your path and became pathless, but the sacrifice and faith of the young Lariel made me show you grace. Let her body lie there and come back tomorrow, to this clearing where she prayed to me — there you shall find a small tree and a herb, growing on this tree. Give this herb to your sick, and they shall be healthy again, for that you never again forget your path and my mercy.’

The next day the people returned to the clearing and really found a young tree in the same place, where Lariel had kneeled for praying — but no trace of her body. There they realized, that Lariel became the tree.

As they got closer to harvest the herb Malphas spoke about, they heard a hushed whisper, that seemed to come from the tree and was similar to Lariels *[sic]* voice. The apothecarii were able to turn the herb and other ingredients, which had no effect before, into a potion to successfully heal the sick. Therefore they called the tree Lariel and the herb, which grew on it, Whisperweed.

And this is already the end to my tale — and now, of to bed you go, it is quite late”, said the grandfather, as he noticed the sun setting behind the horizon. “I can tell you another story tomorrow”, he added as he looked into the children's sad faces. “Hooray”, both shouted at the top of their lungs, and …

This is all I could read out of the old and tattered book, I found at the loiterer. It seems, that it used to be a collection of old legends and tales — if this is the fact, than the validity of this story is to be doubted.

However, fact is: There really was a plague at the Sun Coast several hundreds of years ago, which caused many people to die. It is also fact, that this plague vanished as suddenly, as it appeared. What remains is the question, what happened to the tree. — The soft, windlike whispering can be heard today, when one waits long enough and listens, everywhere between the trees of the Sun Coast. It can't be linked to one single tree and the clearing with the original tree itself, where the young Lariel sacrificed her life, can't be found anymore.

Even if there were times, where the harvest of the Whisperweed filled wagonloads &mdash today it is very hard to find. Just as fleeting and vagrant as the sound of the whispering itself, moving between the trees, it seems that the mysterious herb grows and decays in our times, so fast, that only selected apothecarii and traders are able to harvest it. And the secret to the time and place of the harvest they are keeping under lock and key. But even the adepted *[sic]* aren't able to recreate the healing effect from once, from which was once the gift of Malphas' to the suffering people, no matter what ingredients they use. So you, dear reader, if you are truly interested into the secrets of the herb, you have to search for the Whisperweed yourself, even if you, like so many before you, will most likely only be able to get what you want for large amounts of coins from the knowledge of insiders

Account of an Unknown Traveler: Volume 1

It is the year 4023 after starfall.

Today, on the fifth day of Fundament, our group of scouts set sail from the coast of Enderal. We are the elite, the ones who in the spirit of the old vassal's advance our nation with new discoveries. Out we sail, into the unknown, in what is both our greatest adventure and the greatest challenge we ever had to face. I will end this first, short paragraph with a quote from the works of the famous pioneer of discoveries, Rofus Emmenbrant, in service to the noble Dal'Marak, that is a favorite of mine: "We are only as great as the memories we leave behind."

This shall be this expedition's maxim. It will encourage us, drive us to greatness and, with Malphas' blessing, guide us out there on the far oceans.

The First Harvest, 7th, year 4023 a. St. :

The sea is rough. Several meters high waves are sloshing over the bow, completely covering the wooden planks. The freezing water gnaws at the sailor's bones and penetrates our clothes with ease. We have been on the open sea for three months now, and this is has been the worst day by far. We are five scouts, lead by Sarek Dal'Munir into this previously unexplored region. Isles in the bygone sea without name or outline on a map. Not even their existence has been proven. There only were accounts of "savages" raiding fishing villages and then disappearing on the sea. We left for glory, and honor. If we should make a discovery and reach our homeland again, we can look forward to rich rewards. If not, well, then there will be a few more sailors lost without trace in this world. Who, except us of course, would care for that at the end of the day…

The captain is hiding in his cabin while in this storm the ship is worse off every minute. The sailors begin to tire, but neither land nor aid is in sight. Prayers are all that remains to us. Maybe we will never reach our destination. Maybe we will. We cannot influence the powers of nature.

This evening we spent with the sailors, sharing stories of home and drinking until the storm's noise began to sound soothing. And we talked of our companions, though most sea dogs could only speak of purchasable relationships in harbor taverns. Our thoughts were more with our warm beds and our companions, who were hopefully waiting for our return in there.

One of the sailors showed me the extraordinary amount of weapons they kept on the ship. The crew is to protect us. It felt good to know battle-hardened men on our side, considering we don't know how much there is to the fishermen's stories of a wild barbarian people at our destination. We are aware that, with the impending dangers, our chances of survival are not high.

The First Harvest, 10th, year 4023 a. St. :

The mood of the men on board is abysmal. These waters are cursed. Even the air seems to heavy to breathe, as if poisoned. Like oil, the pestilence of magic, remains of the great wars, has sedimented on the water surface in a thick. It is almost tangible. We survived the storm — it finally stopped this morning, granting us some measure of peace. Though cold wind remains, we have overcome the worst now. After sunrise, the captain called us back on deck, when stony shapes were appearing at the horizon. We are close to our expedition's goal.

Without a shred of doubt, we have discovered the foreign islands. They are surrounded by rugged, sharp-edged cliffs, jutting out of the water inhospitably. Many small rocks before the first island were shooting out of the sea like spears. “Skaragg”, is the fishermen's name for the isles. In their language it is the word for “bones”.

It took a whole day to find a suitable place to lay anchor with a flat shore. As far as we know, the archipelago consists of three or four larger and a myriad of small isles. However, we will only be certain of this after exploring the isles.

As for the vegetation — it consists mostly of meagre lichens and withered bushes. Trees are nowhere to be seen and these lands seem dusty, stony and uninviting. After we explored the immediate surroundings and collected combustible materials, we built a preliminary camp for the night. I don't feel well. Ever since our arrival, I have been suspecting that someone is watching us. But as of yet, we have not seen anyone — no human, no animal — except for a certain species of large, crawling insects living on the ground. Tomorrow, Sarek said, we would explore the hinterlands. I dread what we might find.

The First Harvest, 11th, year 4023 a. St. :

Devon and Treavor stood vigil and reported to not have noticed anything. We filled our travel bags with provisions and, together with the armed sailors, we will advance on the mountain in the middle of the island. Sarek wants to scout the landscape from there, and hopes for an opportunity to create a first sketch for a map of the islands.

We are currently resting, and I have time to document my observations.

The march before our first rest was long. With its cliffs and crags, the land often makes advancing difficult. Where the ground isn't stony, it is sandy. When we stopped to rest for the first time, all of us had to empty our boots and dozens of pebbles were fell out. There is still no sign of human life on this island. It is possible that the fishers have erred in determining the direction from where the attackers came. But the accounts were too high in number for us to believe that. The sailors are always on alert. Just one, Vard, doesn't take the expedition seriously. He lets no opportunity go by without saying that he'd rather be in a bustling harbor right now, with one or even two women on his lap and

a bottle of booze at his lips. He constantly makes inappropriate jokes about his men or us. If one of us should have to die in some unlikely way I'd like it to be him, so his talk sticks in his throat.

For all his nagging, he got one thing right: There are little to no hideouts that would allow a surprise attack on us. If someone wishes to sneak up one us, he would have to come out of the earth itself. I for my part have not stopped fearing that all of our steps are watched. I am staying alert and prepared for the worst.

Sarek's drive and thirst for action is a true blessing for us. His euphoria enraptures the whole group. Without him, we would have never gotten to where we are now. I hope… The writing becomes scrawly and ends abruptly.

The First Harvest, 13th, year 4023 a. St. :

They have taken us. The savages have taken us. It happened suddenly, while we were resting. Vard did his business apart from us others — the first scream came out of his direction. Several sparsely clothed warriors of both sexes, armed with spears, had toppled him. The other sailors rushed forward to help him and slaughtered the attackers. Before we knew where we are, a dozen of additional warriors rose from the ground and fell in our back. Painted in grey like the stones and the sand, they had endured on the ground, likely waiting for prey. We walked right into their trap.

Those sailors who had killed their brothers and sisters had their throats cut immediately and were then scalped. Us others were taken prisoner and brought into their village. Bones, they're everywhere in here. The huts are built out of them, the humans wear them on their bodies. They lie on the ground like common pebbles. The savages were jumping around us like madmen, dancing and hooting. We were presented to a woman who probably is their leader. Most of the time, she sits on a throne of bones that is located on a square with a large fireplace. This woman looks horrible. Her hair is red and unkempt. Her eyes glow like fire, but her skin is nearly snow white. I have never seen such a human. A creature that can't be from this world. She commanded her underlings in a language with cracking sounds and few understandable syllables. Then us prisoners were brought into a hut and put under guard. Sometimes we receive murky water and a kind of paste that reminds me of porridge but is actually much more slimey. After eating it, a few of my comrades had stomach cramps. Diary, quill and inkpot have not been taken away from me. Neither did they shackle us, who did not attack or kill any of them. They just guard us and prevent us from speaking with each other. They are truly savages: Their eyes are sparkling more dangerous than the ones of a Qyranian cat. Their hair is very untended. They often wear jewelry, hair circlets and clasps out of bones. Large earrings are popular with both men and women. They wear cloth, but very sparsely — mostly around the loins. The women walk around libertine, sometimes with revealed breasts. The faces of the savages are covered by paintings of different forms and colors. They are larger with some and smaller with others. They know no path, are pathless creatures.

I was almost certain that they would kill us on the spot. At the moment they treat us better than common prisoners. But this might be misleading. They might intend to lull as into a false sense of security. I don't know what they want to do with those of us left, but I fear them. I don't have much time to write. They have watchful eyes.

The First Harvest, 19th, year 4023 a. St. :

During the day, the guards take us to the village square. I was able to observe the surroundings in more detail. We are in a small, jagged vale, surrounded by high rocks. I was not able to observe patterns in the villager's daily routines. They seem to give in to their lusts without control or morals. Man and woman often get it on before the eyes of the assembled village. They do not seem to have a sense of shame.

Upon closer examination, it strikes me that the "Skaraggs", which is how I will call them, have slit-like eyes that are closer than usual. Their cheek bones are also more defined. With regards to their leader, I can determine that women seem to have the exact same societal position as men, maybe even a higher one. At times I even saw women hunt while the men cared for the village and did domestic work. We can hardly complain about bodily harm. My comrade Devon has received a nasty cut from the fight. It has become inflamed, but I believe he will make it — if the savages won't decide to kill us before

The First Harvest, 22nd, year 4023 a. St.

Today, the Skarrags have taken one of the sailors with them, a man whose name I did not know. Only two men came for him. Both wore scary masks without eye slits — I assumed they were blind — but they acted as if they were still able to see. Had they not worn their masks, one would have found no difference between them and the villagers with eyesight. They brought him under large protest to a cave at the village's border. I do not want to imagine what happened to him in that gorge. I can't help but think of dark, bloody rituals and try to suppress them. I wish nothing more than to escape this nightmare, this rattling damnation.

I have not heard the savages speak a single word Inal. Therefore, they could not have had contact to the civilized world. We are the first humans to enter this land from the outside. This does lend a good amount of glory to our discovery, but I doubt that anyone will ever know that we are to credit for this achievement.

The Star Summer Night, 20th, year 4023 a. St. :

The year is coming to an end. Again and again, they arbitrarily select one of us and bring him into the sinister cave. Then only the two guards come out again. At the beginning of our imprisonment, we were thirteen, four of our group and the rest the remaining crew. By now, we are only seven. Sarek's turn had been yesterday and he had to enter the cave. I don't know if they will slowly kill us there. At night, I am haunted by dreams of what might happen in there. I see my comrades, I see them hang on

ropes, I see their heads lying at the feet of a Skaragg-hangman. My only weapon against the fear threatening to overwhelm myself, is my clear mind that has not yet surrendered to the exertions. If my sanity should leave me as well, then Malphas help me! Sometimes they speak to us in their language, but we can't answer. It always sounds like angry screaming. I nevertheless have the impression that they wish to tell us something, to communicate with us somehow. It is not senseless yelling.

The Departure, 2nd, year 4023 a. St. :

Only five of us remain. Two others have been brought to the cave, but recently, the pace of the abductions has been reduced. The Skaraggs now make use of us as slaves. We work with them on fields beyond the village borders. They dig deep holes in the ground to get hold of a sort of bulb or root they use as food. The porridge-like paste we eat consists of those as well. It is our task to dig those holes together with them. Overseers with clubs are supervising us. When they notice that we attempt to flee or laze, they strike us.

Today, the village was in turmoil. Two Skarrag warriors returned and threw a tattooed scalp before the chieftain's feet. Then she began to chatter and scream enraged. The Skarrags rallied at the fireplace, painted and armed themselves, man and woman. With a large group they left. I suspect they want to attack something. Is there another people on this island, hostile to our captors? I consider this very likely.

Account of an Unknown Traveler: Volume 2

The Departure, 17th in 4024 a. St.:

During yesterday's excavations a young woman was bitten by a snake. The savages wanted to deliver her from her pain and kill her as she lay fevering. This might be the usual cause of action for people with such wounds. I had seen a painting of the snake in nearby caves and had to assume that the Skaragg feared it immensely.

The bite had caused a red, pocky rash on her skin. I had only limited medical knowledge, but since the beginning of our expedition, I carried an old Endralaean cure for many kinds of poison with me. I kept the Skaragg from killing her — almost losing my life in the process — but despite their curses and mutterings, I didn't let them stop me and instilled the lotion against their resistance. A moment before they could kill me for my deed, her rash was eased and her breath became more constant.

After the work was done, they brought me before the chieftain. She deliberated with other Skaragg, likely on what should be my fate. She brought me to a hut with the young woman I had rescued earlier — I believe they wanted me to care for her. Most of my time is spent there, and her condition improves each day. I had to accept that their medical knowledge is inferior. Until now, I have not found herbs suitable for brewing lotions and tinctures. This, and their behavior when faced with the bite, makes me believe that death is their only option when plagued by pain.

The Skaragg observe every one of my actions. I have begun to give them simple commands by using sign language. It works — somewhat at least. Good enough to make them bring me a wet cloth to place on her forehead. There seem to be personal relationships between the savages, not unlike to us humans. A woman and a man come each day to look after the girl. I suspect that these are her parents. I also learned that the Skaragg are able to count in a limited manner by using their fingers. In this regard, there is not much difference between them and the average peasant from Enderal. Maybe they are not so uncivilized after all.

The Hunger Days, 2nd 4024 a. St.:

A week ago, she awoke for the first time and spoke to me. I used sign language to tell her what happened and told her my name. She told me hers — when I understood correctly, it meant something like "Kkraka". I catch myelf observing her while she is sleeping. Her face is very beautiful, much more refined than one would expect from savages and barbarians as they are described in the books. Her body is more wiry and muscular than is common for women. Everything waiting for me at home — my wife and home — seems more distant with each passing day. I need to control my

thoughts, and myself. At times I give in to absurd thoughts of love with Kkraka, which I have to consider disturbing.

We often talk using our hands. Since she still is too weak to leave the tent, we have to spend the whole day together. She is a clever young woman and understands me surprisingly well. I cannot understand every one of her gestures, but a few of them are the same as mine. She made clear to me that I can under no circumstance raise my hand to greet — the way it is common in Enderal and, as far as I know, most parts of Vyn. Such a gesture would amount to an insult among the Skaragg. I thought her a few words in Inal, and, while she recovered from the bite, an odd fusion of our cultures happened. I would have never expected to find a woman like her at such a place. A place every god had turned his back to a long time ago.

The Hunger Days, 18th in 4024 a. St.:

I lose my sense of time. I can still determine days and months, but the hours pass without counting. The sun doesn't appear often anymore. Since about a week now, I am back with my companions. With a heavy heart, I had to leave Kkraka's side. Only two men remain from our group. They brought the rest to the cave. The Skarrag are more open with me now. They get me whenever one of them is sick or wounded. I care for their wounds and seem to have become this tribe's healer. Kkraka visits me from time to time and brings me additional food, which I share with the group. When us prisoners are left alone, we mostly speak about the cave. No one knows what happened there, or whether our companions might still be alive. The only way to find out is to be eventually brought there. This is unsettling for us.

The Kraken, 11th in 4024 a. St.:

I feel deep love for Kkraka. At first, I did not want to admit it, but now I think she feels the same way. She constantly seeks me out and though painting our bodies red, or cutting bones together are weird customs, I can see more behind it. Our hearts beat in the same rhythm.

They permitted us to walk in the village freely. No one of us wished to provoke the Skaragg's wrath or abuse their trust in order to flee. We wouldn't have any chance of leaving the island anyway. Three of us can't sail a ship, especially considering only one member of the crew is still alive. We decided to be peaceful and to try and live in harmony with them. Since then, no one has been brought to the cave. Maybe this is points to a good future. Time inevitably passes and blurs our traces on this dusty ground.

Winter Star, 21st in 4024 a. St.:

One night, Kkraka came to our hut and woke me. She led me out of the village to a cliff from where we observed the moon and stars. Then we slept together. Kkraka was sensitive and caring, completely different from what I expected of her people. All the same, she had a wild, impulsive side

which she revealed during our lovemaking. She was a true warrior. Not imperious or strict, but decisive — completely incomparable to the women in Enderal. Not even to my wife. I betrayed her that night, but I was certain I would never return. Under the stars, I told Kkraka from my home, and the more I spoke, the more it slipped away from me. It slipped over the wide, harsh plains of this island, over the sea and beyond. We completely fell for each other. Since then, several nights with her followed.

I have been a captive for about half a year, and I still live. No matter which end Malphas envisioned for my life, I have the feeling that it won't be the Skaragg doing it. I consider myself and my companions to be their honored guests. Hopefully, I am not wrong with this.

The Arrival, 9th. in 4024 a. St.:

It is horrible. I thought it had stopped, but another one of us was dragged to the cave today. It may sound despicable, but I am glad it was not me. Though I know that death takes us all at some point, I still fear it like a frightened child. Especially since my shattered life had just gained new worth with Kkraka. As for her, I am no longer certain. I love her, no doubt about it. But the other night I saw her embracing another man intimately. The following moon, she returned to me, and a night of love followed, more intense than any before. Then I observed her with another man again. I asked myself whether she was trying to make me jealous or whether she simply took joy in making me suffer. I became angrier over her behavior and talked to her about it. She reacted surprised and left me. Only then did I understand that I am in a world completely different to my own. My ideas of the relationship between man and woman are connected to the values I learned at home, to the way we live there and does not have to apply to the Skaragg. There might not be an institution like our companionship here. It is hard for me to accept, but besides my fellow shipwrecked, she is the only source of support, and I don't want to lose her. I asked her to meet with her lovers at places where I would not see her. She reacted both amused and shocked when hearing that one was supposed to promise oneself to one person only and swear off other urges. But after explaining it to her, she took my request seriously.

The Groundbreaking, 5th in 4024 a St.:

I am certain now: The Skaragg are at war. These last days, more and more bloody battles occurred. Warriors of both sexes return wounded. These are long and hard days for me. Too many wounded arrive for just one pair of eyes and hands. I try to give them clear instructions on what to do, which sometimes works. I have rescued several lives that way.

The last one of our group, excluding me, has been brought to the cave. I then dared to ask Kkraka for the first time, whether she knew what happened in the cave. I wanted clarity, even if my question might offend her. She did not tell me. Instead she made it very clear that I should under no circumstance speak of this again. She was very serious when saying that. Of course I won't give up so

easily. I will find out what secret the cave holds, sooner or later. Nut I don't think they will want to lose me at this point. As a healer, I am too important to them, and during the war I am needed.

The day arrived when Kkraka also had to go to battle. I saw her return with many wounds, though victorious. A gulf has opened between us and gets larger every day. I can say with certainty that it comes from me. It is hard to accept that I am not the only man in her life. Much time will pass until I will be able to. I also have the feeling that the tribe faces a decisive battle. Small groups of foreign savages come to our village and unite under the command of the bone woman. It cannot take long before this dispute will be decided.

The Groundbreaking, 29th in 4024 a St.:

This morning, the tribe and all allies have rallied in the village center. The bone woman announced with thundering voice that the fight will begin now. I understood a few words of her speech. What she said makes me think that a decision is inevitable. Every member of the tribe able to fight is encouraged to become part of the army. Body painting is distributed and spears are given away.

I will join the fight myself. Not because I wish to kill enemies with my own hand. This will most likely be impossible to avoid, but I hope to work as a healer directly at the sight of battle. I take the risk mostly out of fear what would happen if Kkraka doesn't return. She is my only hope in this land. If I lose her, I lose myself. I got myself a spear and packed a bag of the remaining herbs and lotions. Should I survive, additional entries in this book will follow. May the merciful Malphas guard my fate and lead me safely through battle. My body is shaking. The tension hurts. I have never before felt so much fear as in these moments, as we are preparing to march on the battlefield.

Account of an Unknown Traveler: Volume 3

The Exploration, 1st in 4024:

We were victorious. The battle was horrifying, more gruesome than anything I have experienced until now. The countless dead were soaking the earth with blood, turning it into reddish, dirty mud. The hostile tribes had arrived by the hundreds, their faces painted like skulls and their bodies covered in black color. They tried to frighten us with war-cries and wild dances and they had killed prisoners from the last skirmishes with our forces before the Bone Woman's eyes. The provocations merely increased the Skaraggs's lust for murder. During the battle, I attempted to stay in the background and watch out for Kkraka. It was impossible. Spears and stones filled the air, crushing skulls and splintering bones. Screaming, everywhere. In a battle on open ground, without strategy or heavy machinery, but with everything at stake, our side finally asserted itself. The enemy's last warriors were driven out into the waste. I was forced to kill. It was inevitable as I was trying to look after the wounded. We suffered high losses. The Bone Woman had no mercy and scalped all enemy warriors who failed to escape. She pursued the fugitives until every last of them was dead. The celebrations has already lasted a night and a whole day. The Skaraggs dance around a big fire and inhale smoke, entering a trance-like states. They sing, shag and feast like there's no tomorrow. Soon, I withdrew to care for the wounded. For my part, I'm just glad that Kkraka survived the fight. Observing her in her orgies with four different men in one night would have simply angered me unnecessarily. I need silence to digest my experiences. The course of the battle becomes vague whenever I try to accurately remember it. My head represses the memories. Me, as I thrust my spear through a hostile warrior's soft abdomen. Me, as I take up a stone to crush the skull of a man who entered this fight with the same authority as I did. At first his unspeakable fear as he realizes that he will die. But only for a fraction of a moment. Then the last glow of life leaving his eyes, followed by the breath of death. I see it when I close my eyes.

The Exploration, 7th in 4024:

I hardly feel like writing. Ever since the battle I feel strangely drawn out of my body, as if I were standing next to me. My hands carry out the necessary medical tasks without my mental investment. My head moves in spheres of absolute emptiness. Even Kkrakas intimate love and desire can't change it. Her wildness has further increased after the triumphant victory. I have terrible nightmares. They mainly are about the events during the battle, but always end with me walking into the dark cave. The Maw draws me like a magnet. Throughout the day I watch it several times. Sometimes I stare into the black hole for hours, staring into the dark for answers. What is hidden in the darkness? Shadows and horrors.

The Exploration, 13th in 4024:

Last night I once again had a nightmare in which I started my transition into the cave. There I found my comrades. On arms and legs, they had been impaled on the walls. They begged me for help, but I was not able to free them from their suffering. They condemned and cursed me before I woke up drenched in sweat. This can not go on. My heart threatened to consume me. When everyone is asleep, I'll go into the cave. I am hoping that, whatever I find there, it will stop these dreams that torment me. It is my only hope of salvation. I'll be prepared for anything. My spear from the battle and my diary I take with me. It shall not go unsaid what end my companions met; and what exists in the cave. I am also taking a bag with tubers and some water with me. I know that caves can reach very deep into the rock. In my previous life, in Enderal, I sometimes spent full days locked in them. From materials that I found in the village, I've tinkered several makeshift torches. Two flints complete my equipment in order to solve the mystery and to finally provide clarity. Once the moon stands high in the sky and everyone has gone to rest, I sneak to the cave entrance. Kkraka knows nothing about my plan. I think it is better not to put on notice. Our last conversation regarding the cave has made it all too clear that the Skaraggs neither reveal anything about what happened to her, nor like talking about her. I'll find out the reason for such secrecy.

The Exploration, 15th in 4024:

It went deep into the rock. My torches were able to brighten my way through the tunnel. There were not many branches in the cave. Most of the time the way was straight, but rough. Some bifurcations led to dead ends or into shafts that were too tight to advance further. Again and again faint moonlight shone through small fractures in the rock. My search for truth led me on until the stones became more slippery. The sound of dripping water became ubiquitous with time. In the end, the path gave way to a circular chamber with a large hole in the ceiling. Moonlight flooded the room. Roots of plants grew inside via the opening of the chamber. Slowly, I felt my way down over steps, into a sink with a base made of smooth stones. In the center of the chamber was a round altar, radiated by the moon. I had expected a place of sacrifice like this and braced myself on finding blood stains and the last remnants of my comrades. But there was nothing of both. The altar was clean. Not even a smell of mildew and rotting flesh. The entire chamber was filled with tension. As if something strange were in the air. A force that was not of natural origin. Fear spread through my limbs. I took my courage in both hands and explored the sacrificial chamber. There was nothing remarkable to discover, except for paintings that stretched across the walls of the entire round. When I looked closer, I realized that they had been made with a kind of oil paint. The procedure was, as opposed to the traditional, primitive paintings of the Skaragg culture, completely different. It was clear and penetrating. What I saw on the walls did not fit their simple murals. The contents of the images were of such cruelty and so grotesque that I am unable to put it into words. What I found was deeply disturbing. Animals copulating with human counterparts in reproductive rites. Indescribably brutal executions. And that was not all by far. The paintings culminated in the middle of the end wall in a large painting. I remember the feeling that came

over me very well. My body refused to consider the painting. It refused with vehemence, for it knew that what I would see would change me. I forced it to. In the painting I beheld several people in between the hands of a deity with five animal heads, suffering, having opened their mouths to scream. When I regarded it closer, I discovered the face of one of my companions among the tormented. As if someone had torn it directly from his skull and put it on the rock. With growing horror I found more faces resembling those of my kidnapped companions so closely it sent shivers down my spine. I saw Vard, the insufferable sailor and our leader Sarek. They were all in the painting, as if they had already been there for centuries. The images put me into an abyss of fear. In the cave, it was worse than during the battle. Even now, I suffer of inexplicable fear that makes me cry when I think of it. I can neither understand nor explain. All I know is that these drawings deprived me of any self-control. Frozen with fear as I was, they forced me to raise my spear against me. They enticed me to put an end to my life. To kill myself, by my own hand. To my amazement, the spearhead was trembling right under my throat as I managed to escape. Can paintings drive a person to kill themselves? This is not possible. They are only pictures, only simple drawings created by a cruel hand. Nothing has become clearer. The cave caused more questions than before, and my nightmares are horribly worsened by this discovery.

The Exploration, 19th in 4024:

My condition has worsened further ever since I left the cave. Sometimes I hold the same suicidal thoughts that stalked me there. I can hardly resist them. If there are objects near to me with which I could harm myself, my hand sometimes starts to arbitrarily reach for it. Then I have to stop it with my other arm, summoning all my mental and physical strength. It is as if these drawings changed something in me. It seems like a gateway to the world of the dead, trying to get everyone who has seen it into its kingdom. The time came when I could no longer bear it. I told Kkraka, my only confidant, what I had done and what was going on inside me. Her face froze in front of my eyes as I told her that I had entered the cave. She paled. Then she ordered me to keep silent and covered my head with both hands. She looked deep into my eyes. Hers, shimmering with tears, searched for something in particular. In the broken Inal I had taught her, she told me that it was forbidden for members of the tribe to enter the cave. Anyone who dared to, was condemned, for he brought the tribe in great danger. Only the two blind men were allowed. I asked her what happened with the paintings in the sacrificial chamber. She became even paler. I should have never entered the cave, she said, and backed away from me. Kkraka thought I had brought disaster upon us all. She quickly left the hut. I do not know what exactly she meant by her words, but they are certainly no good for me. I won't sleep tonight. I hide all sharp objects so they are no longer in my sight and then await the next turn of fate.

The Exploration, 27th in 4024:

I had to learn that love does not protect one to be betrayed. Kkraka had done just that. She did it out of faith to protect her tribe and decided to act against my life and our love. Abruptly the Skaraggs came

into my hut and dragged me roughly to the throne of the chief. The entire tribe yelled at me. Stones flew. I saw Kkraka next to the chief. She suffered my conviction with dignity. A warrior like her showed rarely weakness. The Bone Woman spat at me with insults, of which I knew to interpret only half. The Skaraggs dragged me to a wooden peg on which they firmly tied me. There I stood, tied up and could not do anything besides squirming and seeing my terrible end directly into the eye. Even now, when it's all over and I look at the stake, I can not believe that I survived that situation. I did not die. When I was born, the kindly Malphas gave me the toughness of a cat. Otherwise I can not explain what happened. I fainted, just at the moment when the chief hit me in the face, pulled my head up and put a bone knife to my hairline. She was ready to claim my scalp for the offense of entering the forbidden cave and having harmed the tribe. When I awoke, I knelt in the dust. My shackles had been severed. My body was stiff, as if I had remained a whole day in this crouching position. My eyes only slowly regained sight before they were able to see that all Skaraggs lay on the ground - I rose sluggishly and looked at me the countless corpses. The Bone Woman, right at my feet. She held the blade of sharpened bones, with which she had intended to kill me. Beside her lay Kkraka. Her hair was matted with blood. She had rammed her own knife in the chieftain's back. She in turn had been murdered by another member of the tribe. As if the Skaraggs had suddenly been possessed by a collective self-destroying madness, they had killed each other, every one the one who had been closest to him. I looked blankly from corpse to corpse. The wind swept it over the bloody bodies. It was the only sound in dead silence. They had exterminated themselves. I sank down to my knees beside Kkraka and put her head in my lap. But I could not cry. Not even scream my grief from me. Nothing was possible. A week has passed since the accident. I do not try to understand. Everything would amount to the fact that I am the one who is to blame, however this might be possible. Maybe I had taken the horror that was in this cave outside. As if through the mischievous intent of a vile, supernatural power that loves to see people suffer, I was spared. It let me live. My thoughts are twisted. I can not speak, eat or drink. The shock has made me useless. Just now, as I write, I can use my mind. Once I put the book away, I begin to rot. What should I do now? I do not know.

The Exploration, 29th in 4024:

I have decided to bury Kkraka properly. I have prepared a bed of dry shrubs for her, laid the most beautiful stones I could find on her breast, and burned her. My tears evaporated in the flames. I can not honor the rest of the tribe in the same manner. I do not have enough strength left to pile them up. Before hunger or the lack of water will kill me, I will leave the islands. The urge to kill myself does not persecute me anymore. It is the numbness that makes it impossible to be my own master. I know the Skaraggs had fishing boats. Perhaps I will be able to use one of them for my escape.

Golden Moon, 28th in 4024:

It has been nearly two months since I last opened this book. I am safe, in the care of a refugee settlement on the coast of Arktwend. How I ended up here, I will now briefly describe: As I had already

written in my last entry, it was my goal to escape the islands. I fought my way through to the coast. From the village, a path directly led to the rocky cliffs. Between spray and stone I found the small bay I was looking for. With great effort I pushed a small Skaragg fishing boat into the water and paddled out into the sea. The small sail caught little wind, and I was slow. I could only hope that the current would carry me to a safe harbor. After a few hours I was so powerless that I had to lay down and fell asleep immediately. For a long time I rested - until the gentle touch of a hand on my cheek aroused me. I saw Kkraka, whose black hair was around her skin and fell on my cheeks - at first. As my eyes cleared, the face of a woman with hard features appeared. She dabbed my forehead with damp cloth. I remember the first smell I noticed very well. It was Trabantis herb, a bitter plant with which they treated my wounds. I knew it from times past, of the times when I had roamed the woods of Enderal. The current had carried my little boat up to a beach on the continent of Arktwend. Once again I had been impertinently lucky, having been washed up near a refugee settlement, for, as is commonly known, there are not many living souls to be found on Arktwend anymore. The inhabitants of the small settlement found me completely exhausted. They were mostly good-natured people. They could have left me there in the wet sand, but they did not. One family agreed to look after me. After my first awakening, I could hardly speak long enough to thank them for their help. The words did not come to my lips. They seemed to be locked in me. The woman named Karmilla, who looks after me with her eldest daughter and her husband Arvil, is very tender with me. I notice that she does not trust me completely and is very cautious with me. Little by little, the inner emptiness that filled me, vanishes. The year in the company of the Skaraggs has marked me. Above all, these last events certainly have not passed without trace. But slowly, I regain the feeling of how life really is, and my taste buds even enjoy a meal other than tubers. The inhabitants of the settlement integrate me into their daily work. They give me simple tasks and invite me to dinner together. Some men are suspicious. They are asking me questions about my origin. I can not blame them. If a stranger had been washed in front of my door, I would have done exactly the same thing. At some point I have to explain to them where I am from and what has happened to me. So far I was unable to. It is still too recent. The Fundament and the day of our departure have long since passed. For a whole year I am already on this trip. When I remember that day, it seems as if my comrades and I crossed the wooden plank to the ship deck just yesterday.

The First Harvest, 2nd in 4024:

I made myself tell the inhabitants of my story. Some did not believe me until they saw the broken man's gaze, my gaze, in the glow of the fireplace. This look was proof enough that I did not give them a mere fairy tale. I left the remaining, eternal doubters their belief. I paid my debt with Karmilla and Arvil with hard work. This is the least I can do for them, after all they have done for me. At a small festival, the children of the settlement asked me about the savages of the bony islands. I told them harmless stories, which were far removed from the reality of the Skaraggs. The little ones liked it. I start to see the world with different eyes and I also believe that the world now sees me with different

eyes. I have become dumb, and seldom a laughter escapes me. Still, I am back on my own feet. As I have left the strange world of the Skaragg islands behind me, it is becoming increasingly clear to me where my roots lie. I suddenly feel the old memories of home sneaking back into my head. It pulls me back to Enderal. If I have survived all this, it may well be the predestination of my path to return there and make my discoveries public. Malphas's will, it could be called. He gave me more luck than cleverness, to accomplish this, my task.

Star Summer Night, 25th in 4024:

An expeditionary ship from Qyra arrived in the village. The scouts were on their way back from Nehrim's northern edge. I had a conversation with its captain, to whom I described my situation. He allowed me to go to Qyra. Because I followed the same vocation and insisted that I do not need much provisions, he did not demand payment. I did not have a single coin, so I was very happy about this circumstance. Karmilla and Arvil gave me all the supplies which they could spare. I embraced her in parting. Any kind of thanks is inadequate to weigh what they have done for me. I am forever in their debt. For several weeks I have traveled the coastline of the continent. Sometimes I go on foot, every now and then I meet a kind merchant on whose cart I can ride for a while. I discover a very special beauty in the desert landscape and write a few poems about prominent points. I had already done this in my youth when I stumbled across fascinating landscapes. The time here makes me at least partly forget my sadness. With every sunrise I move a little closer to home. It will not be easy to return to my old life. If I tell the truth to my companion, she will certainly leave me if Malphas does not give me a second chance in love. I could tell her that it was necessary to cling to something like love for Kkraka and that I would never have survived without her. Certainly she would not understand that. She would react as any tested companion would react to betrayal with another woman and ignore the disproportionality of the situation in which I had been. I do not know if I could ever give her what she deserved, whether I would be ready to love her as if I had never been gone. Who knows if in the two years of my abstinence she has not already found a new companion for her side. As you can see, the troubles of the ordinary little man enter me again - after they have been absent for a long time.

The Departure, 12th in 4024:

This will be the last entry of this report that was initially supposed to document our journey. In the days of my imprisonment, it has become my most faithful companion, and survived the greatest dangers with me. Here I was able to write down all my thoughts. On these pages my mind was always cool and keen, even if it threatened to disintegrate when I was not writing. It is not easy for me to put my feather on the parchment for the very last time. But it is time to seal the end and hand over this report to the hands of our guildmaster so it can be published. I do not want any pay for what we have found. Having safely arrived in Enderal is more than enough for me. What I am hoping for is a monument to my brave friends, whom I doubtlessly lost in an inexplicable tragedy on the Skaragg isles. I will tell their families what happened so they do not have to remain in uncertainty. I can not explain

their death. It is linked to the murals I found in the sacrificial chamber of the cave. Let the people, who do not want to believe it, declare me crazy. I know what I saw and do not deny a single word of what I have written down. Malphas himself is to be my witness. This report is the achievement of many. Our discovery forever lives in it. We were the first to land on the Bone Islands in the Lost Sea. May the souls of my comrades, my friends, find their peace, wherever they may be.

A Little Mouse Milata

A long time ago in the Undercity there lived a little mouse called Mitata. She was born there and lived a pale and bitter life in those damp and foul caves. One night, her disturbed sleep gave her a strange vision:

Bright light, fresh air and a lovely warmth surrounded her. She looked up and saw beautiful houses beneath a blue sky. This had to be the surface, the city of Ark! A place without misery, without the poor and sick lying on the streets, a place with enough food for everybody. But how could she get there? The dream gave her an answer: She just had to follow the main street throughout the large cave, up and further up, and not pay attention to those wondering about her ways. Behind an old wooden gate, she would finally reach the surface.

After waking up, she dreamed a bit further on and finally decided to follow the path shown in the vision. Why live in filth and fear of disease and starvation, when there is a life of light and prosperity at the surface? On the next day she made some final preparations, ate all the food she still had, and then left. She remembered a lot of her way well and knew where the evil rats were lingering around, waiting to rob travelers. Over stones and crates, ropes and ground she silently ran. The surroundings were familiar yet disgusted her, and she couldn't form a clear thought until she reached a split of the street, beyond which she never walked before. She wasn't exactly sure which path to take now, so she looked around and found an old mouse sitting in an open barrel, gnawing on a piece of old cheese:

"Excuse me, but do you know in which direction I can find the gate to the surface? Which path do I have to take?"

The old mouse turned around, looked at her with a bitter face and said:

"What are you looking for at the surface, little mouse? It is dangerous and deceiving there, and they will catch you and throw you back here anyway." He paused for a moment, looked at the ground and continued: "But why should someone like me stop a young mouse from pursuing her dreams... follow the lanterns on the right side, and fall prey to the rats. That would truly be a shame."

Confused and not without doubt Mitata thanked the old mouse for the advice and left to the described path. She passed by a few lone rats unnoticed until she finally saw the wooden gate! Enthralled she ran towards it, the images from her vision rushing through her mind, when suddenly a group of armed rats stepped out of the shadows to the left to block her way.

"Oh look, a little mouse! Where are you running to so quickly, huh? Running for the surface? Really?" The rats laughed at her. With a quiet and shy voice Mitata answered: "Yes, I want to go there... I

dreamed of the surface, of the beautiful city. Yes... I want to go there." Once more, the rats laughed. After a moment of tense silence, the fattest of the rats spoke: "Come on guys... let's not waste our time on this weak and delusional mouse. If she wants to run to those nobles up there, she'll learn her lesson soon enough."

Ashamed and anxiously Mitata left for the gate, still hearing the rats laugh at her dream. Then she slipped through a hole in the gate and finally saw the surface.

The evening sun cast a warm, orange light all over Ark, and the stones beneath her feet were still warm. A waterfall rushed down besides the myrad platform, the flavour of good and rich food filled the air, and the people outside of a nearby tavern laughed out loudly and happily. But Mitata did not understand any of this, she was just in awe of this beautiful sight, and tears of happiness filled her eyes. Then she walked to a clear pond, drank some fresh water and cleaned herself in a puddle to the side of it. Just as she had dried her fur, another mouse approached her and asked: "Where do you come from, little mouse?" "From the Undercity, I just arrived here. It is so beautiful here, you know, I can't just understand, I..." again she teared up, purely out of joy. The other mouse began to laugh, smiling. "Oh this is heartwarming! A little mouse from the Undercity actually came up here! Then I'll boldly welcome you in the name of all citizens of the city of Ark. But maybe I should also explain some things to you, as living together in a society is very different here than in those filthy caves down there."

And thus the mouse explained all the important rules to Mitata. She spoke of the Path and the gods, of the fate and the role of everybody in such a society, of the duties with respect to the wealth of everybody. Quickly Mitata understood the requirements for a well-ordered society, and how to maintain it. Since she had a lot of knowledge about criminal scum of all sorts and their tricks, she soon found work as a guard in a bakery. Again and again, disgraceful mice tried to steal food - the product of hard work of others - disregarding any moral values. Every day she went on patrol and searched for secret entrances and intruders. And as she did a good job at this, the criminal mice soon avoided the bakery, and the baker paid her appropriately. Also he promised that as long as she led a path-abiding life, she would be welcome any time, and that there will be a warm place to stay and something to eat for her.

This way Mitata now lived in safety and security, under the watchful eyes of Malphas and his statue carved into the temple rock. There was one thing however she couldn't understand: Why does almost nobody do what she did? Why did so few leave the Undercity without bad intentions? Ark was a welcoming city, and whoever went here with good intentions, and with the will to do honest and hard work, could live here so much better than in the Undercity. Thus, she prayed to Malphas every day, so he would send dreams to many others in the -Undercity, just as he had sent a dream to her, to ignite hope and will. With this dearest wish at the bottom of her heart, she lived on in Ark to the end of her days.

A Strange Friend

It is of great importance to me that some events of my past life will not be forgotten. Thus, I have written down some of them on the following pages, with further notes to be found elsewhere. If you can understand what I am telling you, my wishes are fulfilled.

I grew up in Nehrim, in a small abbey hidden deep in the Fold valley, covering the Middlerealm in the south up to the large mountains. All that I know of my parents is that they died when I was very young, in an attack, in a fire.

The education by the monks was strict and marked by authority and obedience. When I didn't learn their virtues as good and fast as they liked, they sometimes let the cane speak to help me understand. They said that only if I truly realize their virtues, I will be able to live by the path. It did not really help that the monks themselves lived a life far from their preaching of obedience, diligence, belief, abstinence, honesty, prudence, timeliness and justice. They drank and ate a lot and avoided work whenever possible. If I however let my duties slip just a bit, they got angry quickly. Thus, I had difficulties to deal with this hypocrisy, as it left me in constant doubt of any moral guidance. I then approached one of the monks who seemed a bit less corrupt to me than the rest and talked to him about my problems. He seemed to understand me well, we talked a lot and he pitied my situation, even though he tried to put my accusations in perspective. A few days later however, when the monks got drunk again for whatever reason, he became talkative and spoke to the others about my complaints. Obviously, the rest of the evening wasn't a very comfortable one for me. As the last one of them became too drunk to grab and beat me, I fled into the woods.

I had become anxious. In the rush, I took a fur blanket and a piece of cheese with me on my way uphill to a remote clearing in the forest, and I was glad that I did so. When I arrived, I looked for a dry place to sleep, ate some of the cheese and quickly lay down in the moon shadow of the ledge beside me, even though I knew nobody would find me here, or search after me at all. I just wanted to hide. The darkness and the invisible vibrancy of the forest didn't bother me, however. Wolves and bears didn't live in this part of the woods, and none of the other animals cared about me. Just now that I lay down still, with the blanket wrapped around me, and staring into the vast sky above me, I felt the all those bruises. Everything hurt a bit, but the uniformity of the pain let it slip out of my consciousness quickly, and I fell asleep.

I cannot clearly remember any dreams before this one, and maybe this helped to set it apart, so that I can still recall it in the most vibrant way today. It was night, and moderate rain was falling as I walked on an island. Around me I saw burned and partially overgrown ruins of houses. A roughly-paved road

led through this color- and lifeless solitude towards a large tower. It was just as weathered and overgrown, but had not collapsed, possibly due to the massive, rough walls on the lower floors. The rain and wind left me freezing, so I looked for a way inside. After climbing over some fallen stone pillars, I found a gap in the walls that led into the darkness inside, and I entered. Once inside, it quickly became quiet, and all I could hear was the faint howling of the wind. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see that it wasn't completely dark, actually. A faint, blue-greenish light filled a large hall in front of me, even though I couldn't make out a source for it. I could see some tables and chairs made of stone, and some wooden furniture that had almost decayed to dust. What kind of place was this, and how long has it been abandoned? While I looked at this eerie scene, someone tapped my shoulder.

Immediately, I turned around and stumbled a few steps to the back, there I saw him: Wearing a richly ornamented, grey-golden armor, long, black hair, eyes fierce and full of wisdom and black cloth covering his mouth. Then he spoke to me.

"Oh, who has come to visit me here? Looks like someone got lost in my Tower. But tell me yourself, what are you looking for here?"

Anxiously I told him that I was freezing out in the cold rain, and that I was looking for some shelter. I also told him about my situation in the abbey. Then I noticed that I was actually dreaming.

"I know that you are dreaming. But does it make any difference? I am talking to you, and when you wake up, when the first rays of sunlight will strike your face, you will remember my words. Why your dream brought you here, I cannot tell you. But I see it as a sign for me to help you."

I didn't know how this strange figure in my dream could help me at all, but the odd warrior then spoke to me:

"You are worried and confused by the obscurity and inconsistency of reality, my child. Who you are, how you can make something of your life, and what that could be? Whom are you supposed to obey, and whom not? And why do humans often act so contradictory, irrational and impulsive? And what is your position in this strange play of life? Well, I have found answers to some of those questions and similar ones. No answers in the way the monks would give them to you, but I am confident that they will help you a lot. However, I have to point out that many of those answers will seem unsatisfying at first. You will have to give up a lot of what you believe now. And you will have to simply believe me blindly in some points. You have to decide for yourself if you are interested in my help at all, but if you are, we will see again soon. But now hurry, so you can get back to the abbey before the monks wake up and notice your disappearance!"

With these words, the dream ended. The pale walls of the tower disappeared into a reddish haze, the color of sunrise, as it passed through my closed eyelids. I did still lie on the clearing in the forest, just where I fell asleep, and the sun was about to strike the trees. Quickly I stood up, rolled up the fur

blanket and ate the rest of the cheese as I hurried down the path to the abbey. I reached my small chamber unnoticed and laid down on my bed as if I was sleeping. Just a few moments later, the door crashed open and the cook bawled with his raspy voice that I should get a bucket of water from the well and help him in the kitchen. I simply obeyed his requests silently and thought about my dream the whole time, and especially wondered about the strange figure, this warrior that spoke to me. After I spent the hours in the kitchen to prepare lunch for all, and after all of the tired and probably still drunk monks finished their meal, it was time for a rest. During the hour of rest at noon, the monks typically did not go to their regular beds, but spend the time somewhere in and around the abbey, relaxing in a place of their choice, possibly in the library or the garden, or praying at one of the many small altars that were set up all around.

I however went up to the attic of the large main building, a familiar place that was warm and cozy now, as the sun was shining of the roof. I often fled from my mistreatment and there, in a rather inaccessible corner of the attic I discovered the perfect place of rest for me. I brought some straw and old clothes up there some time ago and simply enjoyed the calmness and peace up there. And as I lay close to the large bell that marked the end of the daily hour of rest, I always got up in time for the subsequent work on the afternoon. There, in my comfy place in the attic, breathing the warm, heavy and dusty air, sweetened by smell of the old wooden roof, I contemplated my dream. The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how correct that figure from my dream was, and what he told me about my own problems. Through his words, I realized my situation. Within me, I felt something rise up, the wish to become something, to achieve something, to understand more of the world and free myself from the dubious teachings of the monks. I thought about the legends of those, who, despite harsh conditions, achieved great things. Like Loram Waterblade who, despite being Manufacturer, became a Keeper of The Holy Order. Even though the realization just started back then, at the heart of these thoughts sat the desire for freedom. To be free of the burden of "morality", as it was taught to me, free of the stupid ideals of "good" and "bad" which led the action of so many people. And as absurd as it may seem, I really had hope that this figure in my dream could help me. With that in mind, I fell asleep, sure to see him again.

I also remember this dream clearly. Again, I was standing on this stormy, rainy, remote island, but this time right before the overgrown tower. Without hesitation I entered at the same place as before, and inside, everything looked unchanged to me. After my eyes had adjusted to the darkness again, I saw my friend sitting at the head of the long stone table in the middle, but everything still was only illuminated by that faint blue-greenish light. As I approached him, I saw him smile for a moment, then I sat down to his left on a stone chair.

"Look, you have returned to me, I already waited for you. I see the fire in your eyes, the eagerness. But before we continue, I want to warn you again. Even though curiosity and the desire for freedom are honorable traits, they can develop into a pursuit of endless personal freedom and power. Some want to reach for the stars just after the first steps towards liberation. And by exactly this euphoria of

achieving something large, of surpassing others, of being superior, a dangerous narcissism is fed. Violent fights, even wars have been led under the banner of "freedom". And in most cases the leaders of these conflicts wanted to channel this diffuse, undirected desire for freedom and superiority, which they ignited in their followers, simply for their own benefit, to gain more power themselves. So be watchful in whom you trust, and under which banner you put your eagerness. Initially, that banner should be your own mind."

The banner of my own mind?

"I guess the next weeks and months, maybe years, will be a turbulent time for you. Or do you think you will stay in the abbey much longer? The world outside has a lot to offer, my child! But again, there are many liars and preachers of falsehood and nonsense out there, constantly looking for directionless and naive people to convince. You, however, should keep to yourself for now, in modesty."

I didn't know what to think about this. Was I really such a naive person? I certainly was doubtful regarding the words of the monks. But even though I felt uncomfortable in the abbey, the thought of leaving and traveling into the unknown by myself made me uneasy.

"You might not trust the monks a lot as you know them and their contradicting behavior well, but what about seasoned speakers you have never met before? They know people like you very well. Just be careful. And regarding your uneasiness of traveling alone: Try to find the reasons for your fears and concerns and try to make important decisions with your conscious mind, not by intuition and emotion. Deciding by intuition is certainly faster and easier, but you do see the results every day."

We talked a lot in this way about many different topics. About the various virtues I was taught by the monks, the reasons for their behavior, about what I could eventually accomplish "out there", about all the problems the people on Vyn had since ancient times. He said that when people speak of the light, of religious revelation, it is to be understood rather as blindness, a mind-numbing brightness, a distracting glare. In the shadows, however, the eyes are more sensitive, and the mind is full awake.

We didn't always agree, though, and he sometimes asked me to refuse his statements with reason. Sometimes, when I wouldn't believe him, he gave me a task for the day, for example something to ask the monks. And most of the time, his predictions of their answers were correct. Our dialogues took place on various places on that stormy, deserted island. Sometimes we stood outside between the ruins, sat in the basement of one of the burnt-down houses, or climbed up to the top of the tower, staring at the vast, empty see around us. I do not know whether these dreams were really dreams, or how these vivid images entered my mind. But deep within me I believe that this island really exists somewhere out there, whatever its history was. But why was it me who dreamt to be there, why were it my dreams he entered, why did he help me? Was it by chance or by fate?

As a consequence of our talks I soon planned to leave the abbey. Again and again, I went into the library and looked for books on the other regions of Nehrim. I read travel reports from Cape Aman in the north-east to the Sea Gate in the Southrealm. One day, between two old, roughly-bound books I found a map of the entire continent which contained many roads and smaller routes. Even though the map was probably a very old one, I made great use of it, as I secretly copied it with all the details I found important, adding further knowledge I had gained.

Then my plan was set. I wanted to travel to the north, passing by Giliad and Salen, and finally reaching the capital, Erothin. I already had a rich and detailed imagination of what the capital would look like with all its alleys and houses, and its people, even though I knew it would actually look completely different. I thought of the great bridge to the city, of the big cathedral by the marketplace, and of its harbor in the north.

Even though the monks had me suffering a lot, I didn't want to leave them completely clueless about my disappearance. After all, they provided me food and shelter for about twenty winters. I put a short notice on my bed that I would leave and probably not return, and on my favorite spot on the attic, I put a longer letter with some more explanations on my motivation, though I don't know if it has been found yet, of if it will be found at all.

And then I left into the unknown. My dreams and visions helped me a lot, even though the made me anything but religious in the ordinary sense. I learned a lot about the nature of authorities, about the power of emotions and how to keep in control of the negative consequences. And I was free. Sure, in view of what most see as living by the path, seeing the light and the revelation of the gods, I lived a life of shadows. But I eventually mastered the shadows, and I am satisfied with the path I took. After all, I learned from a true shadow god.

Even now that I write down these lines, I can hear the Keepers of the Order, how they condemn my tale. So dear reader, please take care of whom you tell about this. The world is full of fools.

Blood Moon

I dreamt of the Blood Moon.

Sorrowfully, he sat on his majestic throne amidst the firmament, overseeing the desolate countryside with his tear-filled eyes. The soft red — with which he covered fields and meadows as the layer-out would cover a pale child — and the crimson blanket of velvet and oblivion bedewed my soul like the shadows of those long, pale trees, their bleak faces forever in defiance of the endless breeze.

I feel as if a part of me died the moment I beheld the unnatural moonlight die away on the ground. This foreignness in the familiar, this unfounded melancholia, this yearning for places faraway, for impossible architecture, for all things unhuman and incomprehensible, for things threatening to erase my sanity. All of this only because of the moon, the moon who sat up there as if he was an age-old child, sallow and pale like a long forgotten corpse.

I dreamt of the Blood Moon.

Book of Poetry

Desert

Empty desert,

Plants dried out

Life escaped

From this place

Dead stones, dead bones.

Lonesome soul, all alone,

Wandering around.

The burden is high

Cracking the spine

Can't survive

Creeps forth, has died.

Blackned Life

A light flashes brightly, disclosing

The world, spinning, evermore

Faster, faster, all is whirling

Around myself

I become dizzy at this sight,

Take out the Light!

Yet world keeps spinning furthermore.

On the Lost Ones

When grief and hate

Gnaw on the soul,

When poverty and war

take their last toll,

They become monsters,

Shadows of themselves,

Fearless without remorse

Against each other, or joined together

They fight, but each on his own in the end.

And when they then die,

They won't rest.

The hate keeps haunting them

And pushes them further,

After death,

Until they fade away again.

Distant Worlds

When the waves embrace the coast,

Splinter at the rocky shore

with a roar,

My memories keep coming back,

Dreaming of distant worlds.

No shore is like the other,

But the ocean is always the same.

Dream of a Soul

When I die some day,

What will remain of me?

My bones will waste away.

But my soul, will it fade as well?

Will it stay, bound further

To this world, to this land,

In a new life?

Or roam free from a bodily confinement,

Free from the chains of time

On the Eternal Paths?

It will then know all there is, sees everything,

Finds answers to each question ever asked.

"Where do we come from, where do we go?"

The mysteries of past days.

To then finally rest with all left,

At the end of time.

Conversation with a Blind Man

Once I sat with a blind man, on a wooden board. We dreamed together about ourselves, each in our own way. The board was laid across thundering, spraying water, tingling our feet. It creaked due to our weight, but we did not dream of fear.

He thought about a warm island with palm trees, a beach and green bushes. There he was stationed, back when he still wanted to wield a weapon. They felt like the vassals when they rested after their long journey through the ocean, now surrounded by a welcoming wilderness, rich in fruits. They liked to delay their duty for a while.

They didn't fight against sea monsters of any kind once they were back on their ship, however soon they were surrounded by Skaragg warriors, and got defeated miserably. These did not know of mercy, but instead liked to torture their prey. They plagued themselves with the decision to think of a different enjoyment for each captive. For him, they decided to pour some hot stew on his face, burning through his skin, dissolving his eyes and taking his sight. Then they left him back on his ship, together with his "treated" comrades and broke the rudder. Like the Lost Ones they drifted on the open waters, moaning and dying, until finally Malphas heard their cries and sent a strong breeze to bring the ship back to Enderal.

Now I dreamed of an island in the warm ocean as well, but I was there for a different reason. It began in a village in Nehrim where I lived with my parents, still being a child. One night, I was awakened by screams and smoke and fire. The village was under attack. I must have been able to hide, as I was later found in the charred ruins, the monks told me. They raised me deep in the woods, far away from any settlement. As I grew up, I decided to leave on a long, dangerous journey, but its course is of no interest here. At the end of this journey I was given a set of tasks, and I was offered a dream for their completion. I did complete them, and I dreamed about an island in the warm ocean, with palm trees, a beach and green bushes. And there I found a diary of my parents. After the attack, they were captured and sold as slaves, ready to be shipped into the unknown. Their ship sank, and they were washed up on the beach of this remote island - father, mother and others too. They did not survive for long, however, as they all fell ill soon, one after another. They dug their own graves in a cave. Then the dream started to distort and shift, until I was awakened again. My journey wasn't over just yet.

And this is how we dreamed, the blind man and me, on the wooden board across the waterfall, until the morning sun caught us. The sun he could not see even though it gave him warmth; the sun I shunned as a sign of infatuation.

Document of the Holy Order concerning the rifts in the intercontinental temporal fabric

There is a well-founded suspicion that the unified time fabric in Vyn is no more, even worse, it is already “broken” since the Starfall in the first era. This means that the different continents, which were created with the impact of the celestial body, all exist in different timelines. Archeological researches of arcanists concerning objects from different continents led to very contradictory results. A conclusive explanation for this phenomenon is impossible if we take into account the huge timeframe between the Starfall and our present age.

In addition to that, the regents of the different continents created their own calendar for political reasons and to strengthen their authoritative profile. These calendars were often retroactively manipulated, sometimes substantially. For example, there is a good reason to believe that there were several centuries “inserted” into history after the founding of Nehrim's main city Erothin to make their own history deeper. We still do not know if this manipulation was done by Erodan himself or if one of his worldly governors made this change and Erodan only tolerated this decision because he didn't want to oppose the wishes of these humans. It's a fact that the downfall of Treomar was placed at the end of the 9th Millennial after Starfall in Nehrim's calendar, while Enderal's placed it in the year 8202.

Differences which did not stem from the many calendars but instead from different passing speeds of time couldn't be perceived by most humans because of the long time periods which were needed for these effects to show themselves. Additionally, the different timelines do not have a constant flow - they run next to each other like carriages whose horses trot in different speeds. There are times at which one carriage is faster, then it is the other way around or both are almost equally fast.

Last but not least it can be assumed that the guiding hand of the Light-Born - in their endless wisdom - ensures that travelers between the continents aren't affected by the temporal discrepancies any way that could lead to unbearable confusion of their mortal minds. Inodan, home of the Light-Born, is an enclave in which the time always runs with the same speed so that the Light-Born can preside over Vyn, free from the different timelines.

However, the most remarkable discrepancy of the timelines - in particular between Nehrim and Enderal - can be seen since the downfall of Treomar. After the death of Erodan, the now godless Nehrim took the event as a reason for introducing a new calendar, while Enderal continued to use the Starfall as its year 0. While a whole millennium was added in Nehrim's history books after Treomar's downfall, only 32 years passed in Enderal.

This difference cannot be explained by the general rift of the time fabric, nor by manipulative writing of history. Agents of the Holy Order have discovered that the temporal shifts seem to occur in bursts more than ever and so the meetings of Nehrimese and Endralean merchants in their respective harbors led to confusion on both sides. As the Nehrimese never had a strong interest in Enderal and its continent, paired with Nehrim's isolation after Erodan's death, this problem never became widespread knowledge - especially because of the discreet actions of several agents of the Holy Order.One of the main reasons for these huge shifts is, of course, Erodan's fall and therewith the loss of the Light-Born governing Nehrim. Since then, Nehrim is torn with tyranny, conflicts and a general instability which also affected the magical fabric. The mage order which was responsible for Erodan's fall (and used unbelievable amounts of arcane energy for that) uses its sanctuaries since then to keep the aftereffects of their actions in check. In doing so, the disordered fibers of magic are focused and stabilized, though it also leads to several magical disorders all around the continent. In Nehrim's Southrealm this magical contamination already gave birth to the baleful nexus crystals, a sign that a big part of the continent is already torn out from the natural embedment of the fibers of magic - a chaos which occasionally becomes noticeable in other regions of Nehrim, too.These disorders are responsible for the entrance of different eventualities into this world, which are at times even taken as reality by Nehrim's inhabitants. That means that the extreme rifts in the temporal fabric since Treomar's downfall are a combination of the actual change of time flow and collective illusion. It appears that the members of the magic order in Nehrim are able to withstand these disorders with their wild magic - they use it to understand and even control these disorders. There are no records about all of this, neither from the mage order, nor from their adversary, the chancellor Barateon. That means that both sides want to keep this a secret, most likely because both played a part in the uprisings against the Light-Born in the past.

Addendum 8234 a. St.

Since the fall of the Light-Born (see the eponymic document for further details) the enormous temporal discrepancy between Enderal and Nehrim gave way to a steadier time flow. There is reason to assume that the total annihilation of the Light-Born repaired the temporal fabric once more. Though the chaos which found its way into Enderal since then points to some much more sinister consequences in the long run.According to reports of the Holy Order's agents, Narathzul Arantheal quickly misused the temporal discrepancy for propaganda purposes after his rescue. Although he wasn't under the effects of the temporal conditions on the continent's surface in his underground prison guarded by the Seraphim, he claimed that he lived there for a whole millennium to obtain a more mysterious and mightier aura in the eyes of his followers and enemies alike.

Likewise, the imprisonment of Tealor Arantheal in the halls of the former Creator's Temple didn't proceed according to the temporal conditions of the outside world. Nonetheless the decades in total darkness were a heavy trial for him - but he mastered it with his power of faith and his steadfast path-abidingness.

Encyclopedia Arcana – Magic, Part I

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

There is probably no natural phenomenon, that is as eclectic, fascinating, and misunderstood as magic. This corpus shall provide a rundown over the preliminary findings.

Small History

Not much has been handed down of how Asâtoron, the first Aeterna, and the Ash People explained magic. It is known that Asâtoron perceived in the magical talent of the Aeterna evidence that the Aeterna are the inherently higher, superior race. After Starfall and Asâtoron's disappearance, the natives of all continents came up with their own attempts at an explanation. These were often associated with the netherworld or gods of nature.

With the gods' seizure of power, the first serious, scientific examinations on the subject of magic began. The god Saldrin is regarded as one of the pioneers in this field, which is also due to the fact that many renowned arcanists are descended from Qyra.

Since approximately 6000 a. St., there prevails unanimity in the civilized worlds about the mechanics of magic. Indeed, there are scattered wild mages, who provide their own explanations, but these should be ignored by the earnest students of magic. It is solely in the wild world that magic is still handled as a shamanistic, supernatural phenomenon.

The Sea of Eventualities

The student of magic must grasp one fundamental truth: Vyn and the universe are just one out of countless realities. From a universe where the water is red and the sky is green, to one in which neither have ever originated, everything imaginable exists simultaneously with our reality. In other words: Every possible event and state of reality exist parallel to what we perceive. Every state of reality that is not ours is termed as an “eventuality,” and the sum of these as the “sea of eventualities.”

Once this is understood, the mechanics of magic are easily explained: Magical talent means the perception of these eventualities, and magical power the ability to bring these eventualities into our reality at one's pleasure. So if an elementalist wants to set a tree on fire, he looks into the sea of eventualities, simultaneous to his reality in which the tree doesn't burn, to another one, in which the tree through a chain of improbable coincidences, bursts into flames. Through vast mental exertion, he brings this element of the eventuality into our world.

The talent of a mage determines how easily he can visualize the different eventualities in his mind's eye, and his actual power — that requires long, long practice — how strong his ability is that allows the eventualities to come true.

Encyclopedia Arcana – Magic, Part II

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

Magical Talent

Magical talent is an inherent trait, although it differs in intensity from person to person. Approximately one in a hundred humans or Starlings contain it within themselves; for Aeterna it is about six in a hundred. Furthermore, the son or daughter of a magically talented individual also has a high probability of inheriting the talent themselves. Exactly where the magical talent is located within the body is a matter of conjecture — though the apothecarii assume that it is, like our virtues and temper, "stored" in our blood. On this topic, the student of magic is recommended to read the book "Human Anatomy" by Rosana Kesselfeder.

Magical talent not only differs in its strength, but also in the way that the talented individual is made aware of it. This can happen slowly from the moment of birth, or in the blink of an eye, regardless of age. Some even die without their talent ever having surfaced. However, observations have shown that life-endangering situations or liminal experiences — like hallucinations through the use of narcotics — can encourage its onset.

Arcane Fever

As adventurous as all of this may sound — magical talent is dangerous. As one's magical talent begins to manifest itself, it is accompanied by a terrible affliction known as "the Arcane Fever." The most common explanation for which is that the human mind cannot cope with the sudden onrush of a newly obtained clarity of vision, along with the simultaneous perception of different states of reality.

If one's talent emerges slowly, the fever will often also emerge slowly; if instead one's talent bursts forth suddenly, the fever will also develop with an equal abruptness. While the affected person will initially complain of nothing more than a mild feeling of weakness and an occasional headache, the symptoms will compound as time progresses. After approximately three moons, the talented individual will slowly begin to lose his ability to distinguish among the various realities; insanity is the inevitable consequence, as is the accidental incorporation of other eventualities into our world.

Many wild mages owe their Pathlessness to the Arcane Fever. While the particulars of the insanity may differ from person to person, one out of every five cases will result within a year in the "Blue Death," in which the body of the sick person begins to deform and he becomes transformed into an outrageous, unpredictable beast known as an Oorbâya.

Encyclopedia Arcana – Magic, Part III

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

The Subduement of Magic

Considering how gruesome the aftermath of the Arcane Fever is, there would be no sane mages remaining — if one were left helpless when facing it. As it is, different options exist in order to safely obtain magical talents. Whereas they differ in nature and execution, they all have the same goal: To only glance at the "Sea Of Eventualities" when desired.

The most common and safest ritual, practiced by the civilized world, is composed of control through meditation and reflection. Here in Enderal this ritual is known as the "Walk To Water," and everybody talented in magic is required to successfully complete it at the Holy Order, regardless of status and means. The walk to water lasts for one year and contains elucidation about the functionality of magic, as well as daily, hour-long meditation and prayer. At the same time, phases of controlled abstinence improve the awareness of both mind and body. At the end of the year, the acolytes of magic have to prove that they are able to handle their aptitude. Afterwards, they are free to go back and return to their former lives.

Other rituals for subduement are known, but students of magic are strongly advised not to engage in them; these rituals contain entropical magic and are an immediate danger to the ritualist as well as to the treated.

Development

How magical talent develops after its subduement varies from person to person. As explained before, glancing into the sea of eventualities can be diversely developed. Some talented in magic may never, regardless of their dedicated school, grow beyond simple and petty acts of swindling using magical tricks; meanwhile, another may become a respected arcanist in only a few years with the right guidance. The form of magic can take varying shapes, as well: Some may develop an extraordinary focus and astuteness, while others learn to control the power of the elements.

To become successful, strict instruction is required in meditation, virtue, and although this aspect is often neglected, knowledge of oneself. The history of Vyn is replete with tales of arcanists, who out of a suppressed, unconscious need, allow

Encyclopedia Arcana – Magic, Part IV

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

Cultural Handling of Magic

Even in the civilized world the handling of magic differs greatly among the individual lands. This is primarily due to two causes: Firstly, because of the varying ideals of the gods themselves, and secondly, because of the influence of the native cultures before their lands were conquered by the Light-Born.

Enderal

On Enderal every mage has to report his talent to the Holy Order and has to undergo the "walk to water." Otherwise, he will become a wild mage in the eyes of the law — and therefore a criminal. After he has completed the walk to water, his name will be added to a register and he will thus become an arcanist. Skilled arcanists — especially those who take on the novitiate and successfully become a part of the Holy Order — have a high reputation, although they often face distrust and fear. According to the 101 verses, magical talent is not a fate which is in opposition to the holy path of the individual. If, for example, a farmer discovers this talent in himself, he is nonetheless required to continue on his path after he has completed the "walk to water." Magical talent is thus to be understood as a challenge which must be mastered.

In Other Lands

Both Qyra and Kilé have fewer regulations from their ruling castes. Instead, so called mage circles, consortia of arcanists, exist, which offer their services as mercenaries and researchers for various purposes. These circles represent very progress-oriented and pragmatic ideals, which is why many notable arcanists and researchers of Vyn originated from them. Although a free-spirited individual may find these thoughts appealing, it is an open secret that certain circles, especially the "Sbintoza," offer their services for unscrupulous research purposes as well. For further information, the student of magic is recommended to read the work "The Sbintoza — Facts and Speculation" from the same author.

The lands of the wild exhibit — as one would expect — a primitive and almost pitiful handling of magic. They attribute their magical talents to nonexistent idols or the voices of the dead and practice shamanistic rituals. For this reason, they won't be given any further attention in this tome.

The handling of magic on Nehrim and Arazeal — at least in the civilized parts — is very similar to the Endralean way.

(Librarian's note: Since the death of Erodan and the takeover of Nehrim by Chancellor Barateon, only the members of Barateon's guard are permitted to use magic. Wild mages, especially Aeterna, are pursued and punished with draconian brutality. The root of this persecution is, presumably, the chancellor's fear that his power might be challenged.)

Evening of Life

The wounds don't heal,

and here I shall lie for my eternal rest,

I've gone my way, my lords will fulfilled

How sweet the view of fields, once crossed

How sweet the smell of honey in the air

How sweet the memories of my life under the sun.

Here I shall lie for my eternal rest,

And with the approaching dawn

I will start on a new path under his eyes.

Journal of Mîail, the Apothecary

Preface

In this book I will capture the experiences of my journey. Reluctantly, with a heavy heart I depart, but I cannot bear any longer this helplessness. To just sit here, in our monastery, praying to Malphas that he saves us from this scourge is something I can no longer endure. I have to do something. And as this strong will does not allow me to rest, I decided to set out for Ark, with the hope to be able to effect anything.

Day 3

So far my journey was, luckily, uneventful. Of course, the mountains are relatively secluded, but nowadays the roads are not the safest anymore. I received hints that close to Fogville a travelling merchant is around, who prides himself on owning very old notes and scripts. I should follow up on this, who knows what one can find within these old texts.

Day 5

Fogville is still far away, at least for someone like me who travels the countries on foot. With a horse or a carriage it would probably be much faster, but I have to save my gold if I want to get hold of these writings. I suppose I have to find a scholar who can help me to translate them. Maybe I can find a hint in the local tavern where about to find such a person.

Day 6

It was worth it wandering all the way. I found a meadow full of herbs, among them also a few rare plants. I could replenish my supplies and maybe I can mix some potions that I can sell in the next town.

Day 7

Finally! I arrived in Fogville! The merchant asked a horrendous price, but therefore I acquired a bundle of old pages, that seem to stem from a book. There are some sketches within the notes. If I understand it correctly, it should be some sort of essay on plants. Who knows what is hiding within these texts? Tonight I will stay at the tavern here in town and try to find a translator for the pages. The time seems right, I anyway had promised my family to report about my travel as soon as possible, and this discovery is a good reason for a message home.

Day 8

I was able to find this scholar that could read at least a bit Pyrean. Better than nothing. He was still expensive though, this cutthroat… So far he did not decipher much, but apparently it is about medicine. Maybe even some sort of formula… I have to figure it out.

Day 9

Today I did not make real progress. I stayed during the day in a tavern to study what has already been translated of the scripts. If they would just already been all decrypted…

Day 10

I cannot stay much longer in this tavern, otherwise my pennies will not suffice until Ark. But I need more time… The scholar has meanwhile translated everything he could. The text still has many blanks, of which he could not make any sense, but I have to get along with it. Maybe I can rent a carriage and keep on reading the notes on my way.

Day 12

Sheer Cap

Baldris Roots

Whisperweed

Fire Palm extract

Day 13 since my departure.

I beg of you, oh Malphas, let me find a remedy, at least a way of alleviation, a possibility to decelerate the progress of this illness, anything that curbs the onset. At the abbey, we worry every day that an envoy might reach us with news of yet another case in the capital. It is a miracle they still even send for us, considering that none of us have the slightest idea what we could do!

Adjust a broken limb so it will grow back together in a straight fashion? At your service, Mydame!

Your child ate poisonous berries? Worry not, Mysir, three droplets of this remedy each day and your little sunshine will soon be sound and healthy!

But this fever, this madness .. we do not know how to stop it. I cannot accept this!

After extensive studies and research I found old Pyrean records that mention an herbal extract. The Pyreans used this extract to clear the mind of anything disruptive — a possible antagonist? If the

narratives are to be trusted, the Pyreans did not fall victim to the red madness. A civilization that grand and mighty could very well have possessed the means necessary to put an end to this horror.

Fortunately, I have finally arrived at my destination. I have reached the Gravespath, this is where the old Pyrean ruins are supposed to be located — if Malphas wills it, I might finally find a remedy here. I will rest one more night and then set out to unveil the secrets of masonry.

Day 14 since my departure.

These ruins are without a doubt Pyrean. A skeleton I have found here is the best evidence for this. There are no humans of this size in Enderal these days. Who might this one have been?

Although I have only just arrived, I already feel that this journey was worth the time. These ruins hold a secret. It is almost as if the stones were whispering to me, calling out to me. They reach out to me to uncover the secret they are holding. I sometimes feel as if there was a voice, but this must be my imagination.

Or … could it be? Images flash in front of my eyes, much like memories, but I have never seen these places. Three rings up in the sky. A gentle ascent to the very top. On golden wings. These cannot be my own memories, can they? What do they mean?

I should continue exploring these ruins. There might be something that will guide me towards the remedy.

I remember how I walked along here once, but I was never at this place before. The hallways just seem so familiar to me …

The more I think about the mixture of herbs, the more I ponder whether I'll be able to unravel the mystery surrounding the possible antidote, the more images appear before my eyes. Memories that are not mine, familiar images that I have never seen. I just wanted to rest, because it was so exhaousting [sic] to search the ruins, but when I closed my eyes, I had visions of a giant pile drilling through my head, my blood flowing from the wound, and blue crystals sprout from my remains like flowers. The stabbing pain in my head made me startle, and have a feeling that I will find no rest until I do not know where these images come from.Again and again I see this pile. Huge and cold it rises into the air from a field of blue crystals.

The images become more and more confused and pervasive. I think about home, about the time before I started this journey, but instead of the monastery I only see these ruins, dead stones that are crushed by time, overgrown by plants. I think of the birth of my daughter, but I can not remember her face. There's just this incredible emptiness.

I need to find the cure, I have come so far, now I cannot give up! These visions will not stop me, but I feel that they don't want it, they keep showing me new places, new hideouts.

The visions make my head roar, and when I want to cool my face with water, I suddenly see the water crawling into my skin instead of how instead of rolling off from it. A torrent grows into my skin and digs a deep crater through my flesh. The pain almost makes me faint.

If these pictures are memories that are not mine — then whose memories are they? Which poor soul has such memories?

Does it have to do with the herbal extract? And if it does, what is it?

I jump through colorful leaves. I run with the bear across stones. I fly high, high above all else, until I'm close to the orange sky. Caution, attention, or I'll fall down …

No, wait, that's not me — I've never seen this place, I was never here, I grew up here.

My mother calls me, I have to stop playing. I do not know this woman. Why does she look so sad? I'll be right there, mum. Why does my head hurt so much? I have a bitter taste in the mouth, disgusting and heavy, and it takes all my strength not to lose my lunch. No, wait, mum, don't do that, I do not want that. This place is driving me insane. I have to fathom its mystery before it's too late. Who knows if it isn't too late already.

Day 15th

I don't want to leave, mum. I want to stay with you. I must find the cure. I must find a way to cure the Red Madness. I don't want to drink this, dad, let me go! This bitter taste, growing stronger, more and more, I cannot breathe, rot fills my lungs, no mum, no dad, NO!

I do not know how I got here. My memories are like pages of a book in a storm, wildly flying toward me, are there really mine? I see a lake, and mum's face, her tender skin, her huge fangs. The stones down there look so inviting, only one step forward, then all is over … No more pain …

No, I must go on. These visions want to tell me something. Am I ready to see it? If it gets me the cure, then I have to find it. Slowly I just doubt whether this herbal extract really does what I think it does. I cannot hear anything anymore. My head is filled with loud screaming which at the same time is a deafening silence. I feel how someone hold my little arms. Why does the pain not end? Again and again I the foul taste in my mouth makes me vomit. Although my stomach must have been empty for a long time now, I spit out a light green liquid over and over. Has it caused the taste?

Mum and dad have forced me to drink this …

Is this the herbal elixir? Did the visions want to show me what it does? I can see how someone bends over me, my body is too weak to move, something moves quickly toward my face, and the pain makes me cry. Then the images that have tortured me in recent days are gone.

I am clear again. And my body is burning with pain. I now understand what the visions wanted to show me, where the memories come from, but I wish I didn't know.

How can I explain that the cure upon which we have placed our hope is not a cure? That it sets the miond [sic] free, as the records have told, but not from illness, but in an unexpected and inhuman manner?

What were the Pyreans thinking? How could they create such a mixture?

I cannot bring this knowledge into the world. It may not be found, never again should someone use this elixir.

I'm going to destroy this knowledge, cost what it may.

I'm so sorry.

Journal of the Trading Post at the Mountain Pass

20th day of Departure, 8201 after Starfall

By decree of Truchessa Dal'Veram, all trading posts of the country will be enforced by a further guardian of the Order during the absence of the Grandmaster. It is forbidden for merchants of non-Enderalaean descent, to travel in groups across the country. Henceforth, they are obligated to travel the paths between ports and trading posts separately and straightforwardly, in company of a guardian of the Order. Before receiving their goods at the trading posts, the contents of all containers will be checked. Travelling alchemists of the Order are authorized to take samples of natural produce any time as well as annalists and arcanists of the Order are authorized to examine any document for subversive or magic content.

5th day of the Hunger Days, 8202 after Starfall

As from now, at the Truchessa's behest, any trading activity with other continents is limited to minimum and moreover to the port districts of Ark and Duneville. The trading post at the mountain pass, like all other trading posts in the midland, has to be liquidates within one moon. Stored goods of domestic merchants will be handed over to them. The property of goods left on commission by non-Endralean merchants passes to the Holy Order, if not claimed within this time and the goods will be brought to the depots of Ark, provided that they are of reasonable value. All other goods and the furnishings have to be left behind at the trading posts and the entrances have to be sealed.

8th day of the Golden Moon, 8205 after Starfall

Commander Manes visited the trading post in company of three guardians of the Order and two prosepctors to investigate deposits of raw materials. The post was found broke open and looted. Two pathless ones, who set up camp in the building, were resettled to Ark, Undercity. From the cellar rooms the prospectors were able to trace iron deposits under the mountain.

17th day of the First Harvest, 8205 after Starfall

Under surveillance of commander Manes the former trading post will be converted for the extraction of iron ore using labor from the Undercity and from now on will be listed as Rock Mist mine. One part of the extracted ore will be transshipped to Riverville, three parts to Ark.

2nd day of Groundbreaking, 8224 after Starfall

After the main tunnel collapsed, the Rock Mist mine will be abandoned. Only the most valuable or most needed items will be taken from the mine. Surviving miners will be relocated to the tar pitch cavern at Ark. Commander Manes will be honorably retired, provided that the apothecarii of the Order will be able to heal his injuries.

Kadath

And so they went and built the Golden City Kadath. Verily it became as glorious as She foretold: Towers of gold reached high into the sky, music resonated from every alley and only the freshest fish, the best bread, and the finest spices filled their banquets. Decades passed, centuries. But the more time went by, the more a certain sadness took hold of the Kadathers. The meals filled their bellies, but the dining gave them no pleasure. They dressed in the most noble of garments, but they did not smile at their beauty. No, all they could think of was the sad hollowness of their lives: What was there to fight for if the world was free of blemish? What value had pleasure if it was there in abundance? Why live, if there was no death? All these thoughts loomed above them like a blanket of black clouds. And so it was that She finally saw her mistake: Man was not made for eternal bliss. Only when enjoyed in brief moments would he appreciate it, contrasted with the heartaches of his brief life. And so She smote Kadath. Acid rained from the skies, winds brought plagues, and the earth itself opened and devoured the golden towers and cities of Kadath into an abyss of fire. And it was there, on the embers of this once so glorious city, that She created the New Order. She created hatred, she created pride... she gave birth to fear, she gave birth to suffering. And she created the Cycle... and with it, hope. The seed had been sown.

King Lewd and the maidservant Devotia

by Jornâs Schmied, desperate scholar

King Lewd: Call all servants of the castle, so that they rush, rush accroding to my wish, to help me out in my miserable condition.

Valet: Very miserable, my majesty, utterly miserable.

King Lewd: Let the one who has created the pathless piece of junk be beheaded tomorrow! I want to see his head roll, look at his dead eyes and abusively grin about his moribund face! This villain may not be allowed to get away just like that.

Valet: As you wish, your majesty, as you order.

King Lewd: He has brought shame upon his craft. I feel nothing but grief and utter rage for this charlatan! He was supposed to forge the King's armor, the glimmering royal plate. I have rewarded him with gold for this vicious piece of work! Behold, my valet, the harness will not open anymore. The hinge is jammed!

Valet: Oh, I can see very well what seems to be oppressing the king!

King Lewd: I am oppressed by the jammed hinge. Yet not only it oppresses my mind, it also oppresses the physical nature of my oh so comely body.

Valet: The King's jewels are oppressivley jammed by the jammed hinge.

King Lewd: Now call the rest of the servants, so that they may unjam the miserable condition once and for all.

Maidservant Devotia: Here I am, my great King!

King Lewd: Devotia!

Maidservant Devotia: Great King Lewd!

King Lewd: Behold, servants, the hinge. My crotch is clamped!

Valet: The King's glimmering crown jewels are cramped in their physical nature!

Maidservant Devotia: My lord, my lord, quite invidious the situation is. Recently I polished the lance of the fair knight Exhiberas, and my hands are still full of oil and grease! I would surely slip off trying to vent your chamber and to unjam the hinge.

King Lewd: I cannot unjam it myself, I need a stranger's hand.

Valet: Such a gruesome day, the bloodline is in danger! Who should be the childless King's heir if the jewels will not shine and be worthless after the unjamming?

King Lewd: What are you talking, valet? You doubt the expedience of the royal gold? I will prove otherwise! Devotia!

Maidservant Devotia: Yes, my great King?

King Lewd: If I look at you, the cramping gets more severe, as if the room in which the crown jewels are stored was shrinking!

Maidservant Devotia: Or the King's generosity and benevolence is growing while he is looking at his despicable maidservant!

King Lewd: Listen, valet! Unexpectedly great my royal generosity becomes. Behold! The hinge! It is opening by itself! The bolts are bursting, the screws are flying! It is blowing apart, and the King's crown jewels are free!

Landscapes of Enderal: Farmers Coast

A Guide by the Golden Sickle for Travelers and Traders

A green and plentiful stretch of land extends from the lake of Ark, with the great capital Ark itself, its harbor to the south and the Farmers Coast to the north. The Farmers Coast consists of flat hills and a cliff rising to the east. The meadows here are painted in a rich green, and large amounts of grain are grown in the lower valleys. It comes as no surprise that a good part of the food consumed in Ark and its hinterland is harvested here, together with raw materials for the town market. You enter the Farmers Coast upon leaving Ark through the northern gate and wandering through a forest. There, a path branches away, leading to the icy mountain pass around the ruin of Old Uskasarak. It is advised against to go this way unless you happen to be well armed and prepared for the cold.

If you wander straight ahead and cross the river at the bridge, you arrive at Bridgehead Farm where family Hafner has settled down with a store. There you will also find the only tavern in the Farmers Coast offering strong cider — the Red Ox. It is delicious and — within reasonable dimensions — quite digestible. By the way: the Red Ox did not receive its name by chance. In the inn, you will meet the Ox in person.

Following the path from Bridgehead Farm in the direction of Northwest, you will arrive at the extensive fields near Corn Farm. Leaving the Corn Farm westbound, you enter the deep forests of the Heartlands, from where a different path leads to a beach that extends far to the east, following steep cliffs. Be wary when leaving the inhabited parts of the Farmers Coast: it can get dangerous for unarmed travelers. The shoreline is long and the cliffs hardly offer any paths leading upward. Arm yourself well before heading there, and prepare yourself for long marches.

If you should decide to leave Bridgehead Farm eastwards, onto the rising cliffs, you will pass by all the other homesteads in the Farmers Coast, including Landlord Borek's Farm, who is entrusted with leading the peasants. In case you feel the need to speak to Malphas, head to Pater Aiakamaton near the Landlord's farm.

At the Farmer Coast's northern end, there is a large cave commonly called the Glowstone Grotto — beware of exploring it. Shortly before arriving at the grotto, however, you can visit the old Farmers Throne which is located on one of the Upper Farm's fields. Legend has it that the Throne stood there before humans ever set foot in this region. It is customary among the farmers to swear the new landlord to his holy duties every few years.

To adventurers the Farmers Coast might appear to be a calm and quiet place, although Vatyrs have been known to strike terror into people's hearts for quite some time. Malphas will thank you, should you free a cellar or two from these beasts.

Those who wander farther east can follow a narrow path, starting at the last settlement before the huge mountain ridge, the Upper Farm. You are able to find him behind the grain field above the river's ravine. Follow the steps up to the Autumn Pass, where a small fortress is located. It has not been manned for years and you will encounter lawless rabble at best. The fortress is known as "Ark's Last Watch" and guarded the pass in times long forgotten, ensuring safe passage during winter. But since no one travels to the Goldenforst anymore, it is in desolate condition. Passing by the fortress, you arrive in the Goldenforst Vale, where the ancestral castle of the Dal'Marek lies.

Landscapes of Enderal: Goldenforst

A Guide by the Golden Sickle for Travelers and Traders

The Goldenforst is a mountain forest, that sprawls east of Ark and the Farmers Coast. Some scientists also associate the northeast stripe of the Farmers Coast with this region, which, even though geographically divided by a mountain range, displays a similar flora. Responsible for its name are the trees and bushes there, that carry all year long golden to auburn autumnal leaves. This vegetation can only be found here, not in any other place in Enderal, but the cause for this extraordinary color character lies yet concealed. The Goldenforst consists of two valleys and a centrally located canyon which connects the two parts.

In the north of the high mountains you find the ascent to the Autumn Pass or Ark's Last Watch, that has already been mentioned in volume I. To the south and by far more highly situated is the Wellwatch Valley. A river, that enters the big lake of Ark at the Bridgehead Farm, carves its way through the region. In earlier times the river carried a name, but today the opinions differ on the question of the name, as it experiences nearly no importance anymore. Often passed on as probable name is the term "Thunderfrost", whereas it has to be indicated that in winter, the stream carries big amounts of ice and snow from the mountains down to the valley and thereby causes a good deal of noise. As a matter of fact, the river's source can be found at the Wellwatch. It is a high-lying valley, that can be reached through the Ice Pass above Ark. At the east end the river originates out of a rocky crevasse and winds in slow curves towards north, before it rushes thounderously down a chasm. The Wellwatch Valley is not a recommendable place for travellers, and neither is the whole Goldenforst anyway. It is a wonder that you can find a little Myrad tower. The brave Myrads guard pertains Malpha's gratitude. I cannot say exactly what monstrosities rove around this place, but you should not be surprised to encounter Vatyrs, Lost Ones and pathless ones. You reach the Wellwatch with a Myrad flight, or if you consider yourself brave enough by foot over the Ice Pass of Ark, or across the sandy paths of the Powder Desert.

You also find there a little fortification, Fort Wellwatch, that possesses one of the highest towers of Enderal. In former times, when powder and other substances from the desert arrived through the Wellwatch to Ark, this fortress served to protect the valley. From all the things, the sparsely populated and barely protective regions of the east and south showed a significant danger. The canon walls of the Wellwatch and the narrow, hardly accessible path up from the sands of the desert proof of the inhospitableness that would have welcomed attackers. Remarkable is also the bold stone overhang of the old stone pit, in case you go astray and find yourself at this place. The rock of the

region is streaked by legacy of the old settlers that followed Dal'Marak here. There are also reports of Pyrean sites, but needless to say, travellers should stay away from these. From the Wellwatch you also get further to the east to Thalgard, but this path you better never set foot on. If you turn towards north, there is a small road accompanying the river downwards to the ancestral castle of the Dal'Marak, the Castle Goldenforst. It has long been abandoned and it is a dangerous place. If one is well equipped, progression on the roads of the Goldenforst is fairly possible, albeit I advise everyone to against visiting this unholy place. In close proximity to Castle Goldenforst is a Pyrean burial site through which one should have access to the northern sea. At least it has been passed down that members of the Dal'Marak, despite the temerity of this endeavour, have wandered through the upper levels and explored this site. The fastest way to exit the Goldenforst from there is by turning again westwards and ascending the steps up to Ark's Last Watch. You can find the ascent where the river disappears in a subterranean crack.

Landscapes of Enderal: Powder Desert

A Guide by the Golden Sickle for Travelers and Traders

If one was to name the most inhospitable and at the same time the most thriving part of all places in Enderal, one would probably choose the Powder Desert. The term encompasses a wide area of southeast Enderal and might fool the visitors of this region. Part of the Powder Desert consists of sandy dunes, punctuated by rugged rocks and nasty sandwinds. Yet another part is a hardly passable undergrowth of palm trees and tendrils of all kinds, shaped by exotic blossoms and dangerous monstrosities.

They decided to call this region "Powder Desert", because at the heart of this hot and almost always cloudless area lie the Powder Mines, where from deep shafts resources are gathered. From those an explosive concoction is made, which is used for cannons and bursting charges.

You can reach the Powder Desert if you go to the port first — coming from Ark. Now and then, ships depart towards the desert. More reliable for the adventurer, however, is the path near the coast, from which you can reach the port of Ark. Such a journey towards the Powder Desert — mind you — is only advisable for those kinds of people that are well-equipped and experienced in combat. The trails there and thither aren't hard-surfaced and are under a constant threat of pathless ones and monstrosities.

Some other path, which is just a bit longer, takes you through Wellwatch straight into the Powder Desert. That icy mountain pass above Ark has to be overcome, yet from Wellwatch you can get to the south — through a giant couloir.

A multitude of paths leads through the Powder Desert, and more often than not one can find routes among them which are not easily recognized as such. Therefore, it is in vain to try to get exact directions. The caravans, which go there from time to time, know the routes by heart. For strangers, however, only some signposts are of any help, for which you should look for on your travels. But don't feel awkward when you lost your bearings. If your endurance suffices all routes will lead to one place or another.

On the southeast end of the desert you will find Duneville, which is a quite wondrous village. The surroundings of Duneville are an uncomfortable and inhospitable place, because there are thick sandstorms at all times and not much can grow there. It would be flabbergasting when there — of all places — men would settle, if it wasn't for the huge freshwater lake, which lies inside a cave deep below the desert ground. The settlement is hard to spot or to find from the outside. That's because it

is buried in a pit inside the sand — at the same time people there are living in the cave's interior on planks.

The only place in the Powder Desert where one can trade is Duneville, it is also the only Myrad landing spot far and wide. You should always equip yourselves well when you want to start such a journey — the paths are long.

In former times, the village Silvergrove was a second hub of civilization, yet in these distant parts no one dwells anymore these days. If you are still drawn to that place you can make your way from the Powder Mines.

The southern coast, on the other hand, is a true shelter of life, because here on the beach you can find palm trees and fruits in abundance. Duneville also gets a majority of its food from the shore, which is harvested from wild plantations by supply vessels. Among them you can find oranges, dates, coconuts but also small quantities of Peaceweed which has an intoxicating effect. From this place some shipments go all the way to Ark, people there very much like these southern fruits.

An inhospitable yet interesting place lies in the center of the desert, if you feel like you are a real explorer and want to go there… The Moonstone Dunes are an extraordinary sight for sure, because here light blue stones glow just like stars between sandy dunes. Between them are leftovers from old civilizations, among them those eery pylons which bring forward energized rays out of the ground. It goes without saying that no one should ever set foot on the interior of those old devices.

After all the Powder Desert is only a considerable destination for well-equipped treasure hunters and adventurers. It's a rule of thumb that the shady figures that you encounter there are of ill intentions. So heed my advice to travel to Duneville by Myrad for you won't find much in the remaining region apart from hindrances or even your own death.

Lethonia — Myth or Reality?
Letters and scriptures by Dinaêl Roth
gathered by Ibn Shri'Amgash

Fragmentary transcript of a speech at the Garamseh-Scuola. Al'Rashim, dated approximately 8214-8216 a. St.

Roth: "No, this is wrong. There were barely any serious attempts at disclosure for decades, nay, centuries.

(A pupil raises his hand. He is granted the freedom to speak.)

Pupil: "Why not though? Should not the gods in particular take great interest in finding that … Lethonia, if it exists?"

Roth: "It exists. And concerning your question: There are multiple reasons for this. The first reason is the danger of an expedition. One would travel for several moons, mayhaps even years. Of course these dangers of navigation would persist beyond the frontiers of the known world.

(A pupil in the first rows speaks.)

Pupil: Skaragg. That is what you are talking of, isn't it, master?"

Roth: "Skaragg, the vultures From Arktwend and these are only those we know of. And certainly the sea itself … However these are merely the superficial reasons. The true matter is, that the discovery of a new continent would contradict the teachings of the Light-Born. It would prove, that even they are fallible."

(Disturbed, partially resentful muttering fills the hall.)

Letter by Dinaêl Roth for a unknown friend, dated approximately 8225 a. St.

Dear Milbert,

I appreciate your solicitudes, however let us be honest: What choice do I have? I can be satisfied, that the order of gods has not imprisoned me. The cartographers and scholars mock and discredit me and even though I know they do that partially fearing I could anger the Light-Born … it still affects me. I have expected many hurdles, but never have I presumed one would not *want* to discover Lethonia.

And yet imagine what this would imply! Undiscovered cultures, outlandish creatures, landscapes you only know from legends … a new world.

So please realize, that I will not just "drop it", as you have stated. This is not a choice — it is destiny.

Your,
Dinaêl

Letter by a stranger for Dinaêl Roth, dated approximately 8230 a. St.

Meyser Roth,

It pleases me, that Tamira was able to keep her promise. A ship should be available for you on the 6th of this year's Hunger Days, if everything proceeds according to the plan. Please recruit your crew in the meantime and choose wisely. You will require everything: skilled seamen, blacksmiths, lumberjacks, healer and scholars, even women and children. Provisions and equipment — weaponry as well — will be taken care of, so you can concentrate entirely on the mission.

My wife calls me a fool for trusting you, Meyser Roth. She calls it a squander of our wealth and predicts your failure.

I believe in you.

Lyrical Gushes and other Fluids- A Guide to the Collected Works of Prince Adreyu of Mith

Composed by G.A. v. M.

Prince Adreyu of Mith is without a question among the most prominent poets of our time. Countless intellectuals from all over Vyn have already travelled to Ark, his adoptive home, in hopes of listening to the artist's passionate lectures.

Skillfully he combines classical metric with ardent, primeval onomatopoeia, thus giving utterance to his innermost feelings in unprecedented manner. And yet, a highly regarded Qyranian scholar called his works "at times extremely challenging, even for a learned mind", wishing for an aid to interpreting the intellectual outpourings of the literary Lightborn.

This booklet accomplishes exactly that purpose: It shall assist the inclined friend of poetry in achieving deeper understanding for prince Adreyu of Mith's flashes of genius. A warning beforehand: If the books of Jornas Schmied should belong to your collection, you should give this book to the flames at once, as Mith's visionary thoughts will remain sealed to you anyway.

Opus 1: In the shackles of lust.

On rocks I stood, amidst the sea,
Before me nymphs of ancient times
Uhhhh! Ahhh! Oh yes!

Sensual and sweet as sin,
their bodies touch my tender skin!
Mmmmh! Oh, yummy! Tastes like cherries!

Lo, how their bosoms make me languish!
And leave my poet's heart in anguish!
Woe! Woe! Away, away, away you go!

They purse their lips, so dark and red,
such scheming play! Such vexing hex!
Ahhhh! Uhhh! Brute lust!

With strongest will, my soul so small,
I fled their calling after all.
Yippie!

The poet here unambiguously recounts a seafarer's struggle against the seductions of the fire nymphs who live among the coves and bays of the sea with the same name.

Witty, but gentle still, he conjures up powerful images in the first stanza, adding a dramatic touch by utilizing words such as "gone", "sea" and "times" and thereby reminding us of the era of "Endralean Epics". But as soon as we are lulled into false security by his aptly chosen words, he surprises us with an apparent breach in style: Uhhhh! Ahhhh! Oh yes!, the lines shout at us with archaic power, arousing emotions of insatiable lust and temptation. The renowned genius drags us even further into the vortex of sexuality in the next stanza, where he eloquently describes how the nymphs, full of femininity, attempt to drive the lyrical self to them and certain death. For a short moment the hero breaks down, as the words "Mmmmh! Oh, yummy! Tastes like cherries!" show. Full of sarcasm, they point to the primeval helplessness a beautiful man or woman — according to preference — can put us in.
By choosing the "cherry", our poet consciously uses a sensual fruit to create a connection with the second line, symbolizing the relentless predicament our hero now finds himself in — should he take to the fruit or to flight?

Thinking of his companion and home in Ark, the poet then increases the cunning seafarer's anguish beyond measure as the nymphs ecstatically rub themselves on his body, making him feel their full, well-formed lust buds. The guttural sounds also convey the endless anguish now spreading in the speaker's heart for the first time: "Woe! Woe! Away, away, away you go!".

Finally, the wicked poem achieves its emotional climax in the fourth stanza. While the lecherous mermaids continue in their attempts to drag the seafarer with them in the abyss, a stream of doubts, existential angst and wayless temptation erupts in his head. "Ahhhh! Uhhh! Brute lust!"

(Here it shall be remarked that the poet only reluctantly added the words "brute lust" so as to make the theme of his literary masterpiece easier to grasp for his not as well-read, but well-meaning fellow intellectuals — a virtue found in precious few poets, speaking for the princes human greatness.)

Then, the delighted reader — engaged by the heartbreaking, epic struggle of an honest man with his primeval instincts — is finally released.

In order to avoid leaving the emotionally exhausted mind of the reader in the real world in an all too melancholical condition, the genius adds a tired "yippie!" to the second last line — a despaired yet relieved exclamation of the brave seafarer, who will never forget his fateful encounter with the lecherous demonesses.

Mother's Pain

This fictional tale is dedicated to all those who had to live through similar events, in one way or another... for the peace of mankind.

Thick clouds laden with rain obscured the evening sky that surrounded the tower of the fort. Lady Idara, ruler over a great land, stood upon the tower and was embraced by the cold wind. She was deeply saddened by the decision of the great king, ruler over every kingdom of the world, that her loved one, a man from her court, wasn't noble enough to take the seat beside her. The great king grumbled: "A plain sergeant as a king? Get him away, he shall mate with people of his kind!".

She could have dealt with the decision and, despite great sorrow, could have looked for another husband. However, she was expecting a child from her loved Ratar. So, she stood in the wind and rain upon the stone tower, gazed into the distance and held Ratars hand.

"Idara, please listen to me: our love is by no means cut short by this decision. Of course, I hoped that I could rule at your side officially, but I am certainly not forbidden to be close to you whenever possible. Something else however troubles me: The child. Where should it grow up, in which position will it end up? Will it know about its origin? I think it would be the best to hand it to a foster mother, where it can have an untroubled childhood and live free from all the trouble at the court."

"But... Ratar, we can't just give it away! It is our child, I will give birth to it, and I surely want to see it grow up and care for it, instead of giving it to strangers!"

"Idara... I know your desires very well and understand your point. But how do you want to do it? How do you want to raise our child without having a husband? The court wouldn't accept it, and neither the great king. You can't imagine the trouble it would cause. As a compromise, let's give it to a foster mother at our court. That way we can spend as much time with it as possible, while avoiding the big trouble."

That was the agreement they made, and soon they found a good foster mother at the court, a maid and cook, whom the gods refused the gift of fertility. She was a very trustworthy woman and was enormously grateful to be able to finally raise a child on her own. She promised to keep the situation a secret and to care for the childlike for her own. Finally, Idara gave birth to a girl, and they named her Nezethi. It soon showed that she was an intelligent child, always curious and looking for adventures. She enjoyed playing with the other children, but often got in fights, which she usually won. Ratar soon had the idea to recruit Nezethi for the city guard someday, and when both Idara

and him realized that Nezethis somewhat wild character remained as she got older, Idara reluctantly agreed. Full of joy to finally learn to wield proper weapons, Nezethi practiced a lot and soon became the best of the apprentice group. But her talent didn't flourish without envy from the others.

The two sons of the court's blacksmith and brew master couldn't stand that a girl, and even one from a low class, was ahead of them in the training of the guards. They tried to complain about her on various things to sergeant Ratar, but he seemed to like her a lot and cared little for the two angry boys. When Nezethi won the archer's tournament, they finally lost their temper. On the way home from the training yard they ambushed her and pulled her into a nearby barn where they tied her up. They shouted at her, brook her bow, bent her sword and, to remind her for all times that someone like her has no place at the guard, heated the tip of her sword with a torch and tried to brand her arm with it.

At that point, Nezethi lost her mind and unconsciously cast a forbidden spell which threw the brew master's son away with such a tremendous force that he smashed, back first, through the wooden planks at the end of the barn and landed on the street, heavily wounded. Some peasants heard and saw this, rushed to the scene and called for the guards.

It was without any doubt that Nezethi used a forbidden spell, which usually was punished by execution. In the light of this, the misbehaviour of the boys was disregarded. But as Nezethi was just fifteen winters of age, she couldn't possibly have learned the spell by herself, and so the execution was ruled out. However, this led to the assumption that her mother, the maid from court, must have taught her the secret spell, as it was not uncommon for witches to secretly pass on their knowledge disguised as a form of self-defence. And so, it was decided by the committee lead by Lady Idara, that the mother was to be executed by burning on the stake. As a sign of rejection of this sinful witchcraft, it was ruled that Nezethi herself should light the fire and burn her own mother.

Without any form of escape and with tearing eyes, Nezethi went to the stake that fateful day, holding a flaming torch in her hand. She looked at the face of her supposed mother and fulfilled that unbearable task only the cruelest minds could have imposed on her. By lighting the stake, she also lighted an unextinguishable hatred in herself. Hatred towards herself for doing all of this and for not having joined her mother in the flames; a hatred towards all those who were involved in her sentence; a hatred towards all those who didn't prevent it.

And thus, she sweared, she set the irrevocable goal to extinguish all royal houses one day, to see them burn down by her hand. All kings and queens, Lady Idara up front, should be judged for their cruel reign. And by all of her might, it was bound to happen.

A few years later, the first royal house had burned down, and she was captured, but due to Lady Idaras influence, she was not executed, but imprisoned in solitude in a far place. However, while she was preparing for her strike, she gained a fellowship that stayed true to her vision. One day, they

could free her from her prison, and at that point, there was no way to stop her rage. One house after another burned down until only her home kingdom led by Lady Idara was left, at whose side the great king had taken refuge.

Nezethis raging fellows swept the city but spared all those who didn't oppose them. Up the hill at the courthouse, only Nezethi and her closest fellows entered. In calm anticipation of their fate, Lady Idara and the great king stood in the high-walled entrance hall. Somewhat unsettled and equally angered by their fearlessness, Nezethi drew her sword and spoke: "For the unspeakable injustice and cruelty me and all of my fellows had to suffer, you now shall pay with your life! Together with this house, symbol of your reign lasting far too long, you shall burn! I will erect a new order and make sure it won't fail as this one did."

"Nezethi, listen to me! Even though I know that my fate is sealed, I have to tell you: You are not the daughter of the maid at this court, but my daughter, and sergeant Ratar is your father! Your punishment from back then wrenches my heart every day. Please, forgive me. If it sets an end to your rage, put me to death. But please, for the good of all the people, continue this reign in peace."

"But... how can it be?! Why did you do this to me?! No... I will not continue this reign, not as your daughter, not as the legitimate successor of this abominable dynasty. I cannot extinguish the fire burning inside of me, so I will do what I should have done back then."

Nezethi grabbed a torch from one of her fellows, threw bags of oil on the wooden floor beneath Idara and the frightened great king, and set them and the entrance hall aflame. Her fellowship fled the scene, but Nezethi stepped forward through the flames, on to Lady Idara, fell into her arms and let the flames do their deed.

Manual of dreams and visions

by Makabius Schwarzfunkel the virtuoso

Welcome, friends. If you call this book your own, you have made the first step towards inner peace and quiet. The instructions will help you gain a better self-understanding, just like the one I have obtained after many years of spiritual voyages. This book also constitutes the beginning of your journey towards becoming to a true master of dream and vision interpretation. I personally verified all of these interpretations through extensive research and tests.

Part I

Interpretations for beginners: animal & creature symbols

The rat:

A symbol of subterfuge and theft. Should it appear to you in a dream or vision, it might be advisable to secure the house and to bar all doors and windows. Furthermore, I urge you to abstain from wandering the streets and dark alleys at night. Be on your guard.

The bear:

A symbol of an increased need for rest. Just sit back and let the people talk. An extensive respite is always healthy and strengthens the mind. If this animal has appeared to you, cosy naps are advisable at all hours of the day. Hard work is to be shunned.

The spider:

Contrary to the popular repulsion this animal elicits, the spider actually is a positive symbol, signifying the conjunction of foci in your soul. Its appearance in dreams or visions implies that body and mind are in harmony throughout all the eight planes.

The leor:

Most definitely a trying, debilitating creative period ahead. Consult your local apothecarius immediately and acquire a remedy for back complaint.

The myrad:

Ascension is in the air. Not only often observed as a hallucinatory apparition during consumption of glimmercap dust, myrads are also a symbol of freedom and detachedness from all earthly concerns.

The vatyr:

An allegory of resurrection — both good and bad. Something long lost is found or returned to you. Or something one had hoped was gone for good creeps back in again. An excellent example being reeking stockings.

Part II

Advanced interpretations: mundane symbols

Having successfully read the first part on animal & creature symbols and applied it to your fellow men as well as yourself, you are now ready to enter the next tier of interpreting dreams and visions. Henceforth, you may call yourself a novice of the arts. Proceed without delay. Your time is limited — the end will come. Your apprenticeship will continue with everyday phenomena. I personally verified all of these interpretations through extensive research and tests.

The bone in the meat soup:

Should a bone unexpectedly appear in your meal and you happen to bite on it, you have either forgotten or overlooked something very important. As a primary course of action I recommend thoroughly searching all the cupboards, cabinets and storerooms for hidden corpses that might have faded into obscurity after the last fit of rage.

The loss of a tooth:

A transition is inevitable. It has to take place in order for new light to rise from the decline and illuminate your innards. Often correlates with the bone in the meat soup.

Excrement:

Constipation is a common sign of fear to let go of memories past. Excessive defecating on the other hand has got nothing to do with visions, unless the excrement is of peculiar shape. In that case, it would be advisable to study it further and conceivably take it to a specialist for analysis.

Stairs:

In case of an arduous ascent — a symbol of the adversities the person affected has to face in real life. Conversely a sign of swift progress. Henceforth, when encountering stairs in real life, do your best not to stumble — for that might entail years of bad luck.

Pregnancy:

Keep your eyes peeled for a life-altering message. Chances for such a one are high if your dream or vision revolves around pregnancy. The sign of the unwanted pregnancy on the other hand usually

warns a woman that the kids originating from this union will turn out hideous. Such fate can only be averted by seeking a new sexual partner.

Intercourse:

Dreams or visions containing coitus are not necessarily a good sign, even though the recipient of the supernatural message will indubitably think so initially. When having a partner for life, dreaming about lovemaking with another man or woman and not regretting it afterwards spells doom.

Part III

Master interpretations: ways to die

Should you have proven seasoned enough to handle even the advanced interpretations, the last and most challenging chapter of your apprenticeship to become a master interpreter of dreams and visions now awaits. It all revolves around different manners of death that can signify severe change in real life. I personally verified all of these interpretations through extensive research and tests.

Drowning:

Contrary to misguided opinions among my peers, this symbol of death has no meaning whatsoever. Worry not and just concentrate on more important things in life.

Burning:

Fire is always interpreted as having a cleansing effect. Should you watch your own body burn, consider that maybe you have gravely neglected your personal hygiene. This should be remedied forthwith. This might even lead to the love of your life finally appearing.

Falling:

Be prepared for a rude awakening! Plunging from a cliff or any other high place is always a warning. Your are stumbling directly into a trap that will literally pull the rug out from under you. For the time being, trust no one, not even your neighbour.

Hanging:

Did you commit any deeds against your path lately? If so, the moment of remorse, of confession and repentance is upon you. Death by hanging is a sure sign that somebody will find you out very soon.

Execution:

With the loss of your head, the highest centre of your body, your soul will coincidentally lose all control. It cannot be ruled out that — because of such a rare, but devastating dream — you will be reborn as a particularly dumb animal. A goat for instance. A potent remedy is generous consumption of boiled frogs. The inherent substances will help to rebalance your soul.

Sickness:

Anyone being plagued by sickness in his dreams or visions is carrying a heavy burden that is responsible for many a recent malady. Smoking peaceweed is always recommended, as it will make all your worries go up in smoke in no time.

I extend my solemn congratulations to you, dear fellow virtuosos! Finally you are at peace with yourselves and henceforth will carry the title of "Master interpreter of dreams and visions"

Myths and Legends Volume 1: The Blind Miner

written by Archmagister Gawayn Girathû, 8111 n. St.

The "Blind Miner" is supposedly one of the most well-known Endralean lore. The reason for that is likely the fact, that it occurs right beneath the feet of Ark's citizens: down in the mine shafts of the Tar Pit, the country's second biggest mine system.

The Blind Miner, whose actual name is unknown, is, according to the legends, a Lost One that lurks in the tunnels of the Tar Pit. Countless lives of careless workers and Undercity dwellers are said to be taken by him. His eyes are hidden behind bloody rags, his body covered in sickly skin and boils; his grotesque face consists of inhuman teeth, sharp and spiky like those of a wolf.

The reason for his existence is, according to the legends, a disaster which took place 6342 n. St. deep down in the mines: A rockfall buried a tunnel together with fifteen miners, trapping and separating them from the outside world. The amount of rubble was too high, even after three weeks the entrance was still closed off. After another three weeks passed the miners were believed to be deceased, the entrance was reburied and the path barricaded.

A cruel fallacy — for the miners were still alive. The first few weeks they lived off the little amount of provisions they were carrying with them, once it ran short they started catching Eiterkäfer and rats, to consume them. The sheer will to survive and the sound of the pickaxes on the rocks, that were isolating them from the outside world, gave them hope.

As the sound went silent, however, they started to panic. They were trapped for all eternity, and they knew it. Little by little they lost their mind, everyone except the one we know to this day as the Blind Miner. He, a former foreman that was praised with popularity among his comrades, reminded everyone to be calm — and hour after hour, day after day, spent his time searching valiantly for a way out.

The more days passed, however, the more dreadful their situation became. The Blind Miner was no longer able to soothe his comrades panic, and the steadily worsening hunger did the rest. One day a glimmer of hope appeared: The Blind Miner discovered an exit. With joy he wanted to return to his comrades, but on his hurry back he encountered a cruel sight: the corpse of one of his men. He was terribly mutilated, his belly was ripped open by some sort of axe. Blood and intestines were scattered around the dusty ground.

Even before he followed the voices coming from around a corner, he knew what happened: His comrades devoured that person.

Raging anger consumed the man. They were this close from rescue, this close! And still they decided to engage in this inhuman act, instead of believing in Malphas' light. Without a second thought the Blind Miner freed the axe from the corpse and rushed to his comrades, which stared at him with bloodstained mouths and frightened eyes. Before they knew what happened to them, he killed them all.

But instead of leaving the mine shaft, he stayed with them, because he realized what he did. Filled with disgust he ripped out his eyes, to no longer have to bear the sight of his deed.

Author's note:

To this day it is unclear if the "Blind Miner" actually exists, but arcane investigations point toward it. Apparently he has a magick protection at his disposal, which makes it impossible to physically harm him. According to legends, a psionic totem may break the spell, but it is unclear how one could be created, especially since the practice of psionics is forbidden. Solely the apothecarii could have access to this knowledge; but even if they do, they would have probably locked it away.

Myths and Legends Volume 2: Arveldhiin the Wanderer

written by Archmagister Gawayn Girathû, 8111 n. St.

According to a little, yellowed chapbook, in Dark Valley the Grimm resides. The following part could be secured from the rotten booklet:

Deep down, in Dark Valley,

a man with deep sorrow

steps up and down, evermore.

Salavation [sic] is his objective.

For long he craves the last voyage,

the eternal paths to come,

but refused it is to him,

he wishes for exemption.

His inner monster rages and howls,

when he digs his grave,

Since long ago it has taken him in possession

and inhibits his dead.

Now he lurks for valiant fighters,

who bring an end to his agony.

But every weapon failed

on the black pelt of the Grimm.

The white in his eyes dazzling,

seems frightened aflame,

so is the monster's only weakness,

the blazing flame in flesh.

His earlier life long forgotten,

his deeds, his name.

The atonement through Malphas was righteous,

as he…

Remark of the author:

The ink of the last lines dissolved due to the moisture and the paper went rough and fragile. Who or what exactly it is concerning is therefore not further known, but it seems his human cast was accompanied by something bestial. However, stories about the criminal Arveldhiin show remarkable similarities.

Centuries-old legends report about the infamous murderer named “Arveldhiin without scruple", who is assumed to have conducted countless murders in Dark Valley. Not even high-ranked members of the Order were excepted.

Once Arveldhiin was lurking on a trader caravan in the Dark Valley. The murderer's gang created a bloodbath spared nobody, even children were among the dead. Malphas himself spoke a punishing verdict upon Arveldhiin that his character would stick on him for all time. He combined the murderer without scruple with a grotesque, wolf-like monstrosity, with which he had to fight from then on in his mind, and which occasionally broke outward. Since like a wolf, Arveldhiin was characterized by a wild and animal-like mentality, which he had to fight as a burden with his last humanity ever after.

Myths and Legends Volume 3: The Ash Widow

written by Archmagister Gawayn Girathû, 8111 n. St.

One of the perhaps most eerie and gruesome legends of Enderal is the one surrounding the Ash Widow.

The Ash Widow was a charming young woman who had been promised to one of the sublimes as his companion. Her hair was long and colored in a reddish blond in the likeness of late autumn leaves; and her eyes were tinted in the deep blue of the sea. She was wise and well-read, played the lute and enjoyed large popularity at her family's estate, in no small part due to her cheerful and buoyant character. Her future companion, the son of a rich count, also was of high repute; and when the two swore each other companionship, the bards were singing many a song of in praise of the two lover's dignity.

But not long thereafter the newlywed wife noticed discrepancies in her husband's character — though at feasts, with other sublimes present, he always spoke gently of those treading the lower paths — his wife heard him tell different stories entirely after a few cups of wine: He held no sympathy for craftsmen, artisans and, worse still, those dwelling in the Undercity.

"There is a reason as to why Malphas blessed us with our path", he said. “Our blood is worth more”. If initially it were such words that made the young woman feel anxious, words quickly turned into deeds: He had the legs of a stable boy who had saddled his horse incorrectly broken; and knocked out a serving girl's teeth after she had spilled wine on his coat. When the young woman confronted her husband about this, he merely regarded her dismissively and walked away.

As the years passed, the woman's sorrow grew with each new winter. Often she thought about running away, however, as her husband's crimes were not directed at her and he could even show noble behavior at times, she did not dare to put these thoughts into practice: After all, where could she have fled?

One day, however, things would take a turn for the worse: A young, Half-Aeternean maidservant had begun her service at the castle. She was hardly sixteen winters old, and of shy nature. But the woman noticed her companion's glances and stares — filled with a mixture of malevolence and lust that sent shivers down her spine.

Soon thereafter, the woman realized how the young servant was always avoiding her glance, the head bowed as if she were terribly ashamed in her presence. Her companion, too, came to their bed increasingly absent and unenthusiastic.

Day and night she pictured to herself what her husband might do with the girl until she decided to hide in the wardrobe on the day the Half-Aeterna was supposed to clean the chamber. Before, she told her companion that she would seek out the peddlers visiting the region near the castle, as they did every full moon.

As soon as the servant had shut the door with shaking hands, the latch rushed down. From within the wardrobe, the woman saw her companion standing in the doorframe, panting with excitement. The Half-Aeternean girl stood still, frightened and without any sign of resistance as the man grabbed her — it seemed that she had accepted her fate long ago. After being rudely pushed to the wall, where she hit her head, something unexpected happened. A wave of magic energy took hold of the man — the traumatizing event must have awoken the young girl's magical talents. Magical bands entangled the man's right hand and covered it in darkness. Angry and surprised, he grabbed her throat and the shocked girl was no longer able to keep up the spell unknown to her. When the dark veil dissolved suddenly, only a malformed claw remained where previously the man's hand had been.

Irritated by his body's wild-magical deformation, the man waited for a few seconds, thinking, though his healthy left hand remained at the servants throat. He concluded that he would be unable to continue walking the path of the sublimes when soon all world would know that he laid his hands at a witch — his previous life would be at an abrupt end. So he took hold of a glowing oil lamp, but before he was able to throw it at the still petrified servant, his wife stormed out of the wardrobe to stop him.

But it was to late — the blazing oil poured on the floor and in moments the woman's and the young girl's clothes began to burn. In the moment of their death, the servant's wild-magical powers merged with the deceived woman's desire for revenge to form a powerful and horrible spirit-being — the Ashen Widow.

After the fire was quenched, the man chopped off his deformed claw-like hand with a woodcutter's axe. To his family and the other ones present at court he insisted that the half-Aeternean servant had attacked his wife with wild magic out of envy, burning down a part of the room. He had tried to rescue his wife when his hand was burned in the magical fire, forcing him to leave his wife and remove the remains of his charred hand.

The count's son was able to preserve his good name, continued on the sublime path and finally succeeded his father. But up to the end of his life he was unable to find a new companion; and each night he encountered the Ashen Widow, who robbed him of his sleep and poisoned his dreams. His life as count and lord of the castle was a miserable one. And when his last hour approached, he realized

that it would long be forbidden for him to enter the eternal paths; and with remorse he anticipated his next life which, in accord with Malphas' will, he would have to spend in the Undercity.

Author's note:

The myths claim that the Ashen Widow's ghost still walks among the castle's ruins; and those foolish enough to bring her husband's claw to the old castle will be able to raise her from the dead. We can only speculate on the claw's current location, but it is said that it still reaches high prices among antique dealers. Again and again, one of them sells the horrid remains for good money after acquiring it for little from disheartened and ashamed adventurers who did not turn out to be daring enough to conjure up the Ash Widow's spirit.

Myths and Legends Volume 4: The Mountain in the Desert

written by Archmagister Gawayn Girathû, 8111 n. St.

In younger times, the mothers from Duneville told their children of the "Mountain in the Desert." This, they hoped, would purge their children of their youthful boldness, so challenging to those who seek to stay true to the path, especially in their early years. The words set down here concern a wild mage who retreated to the Powder Desert, the better to surrender himself fully to Entropy — and to pull otherworldly beings from different realities into our own. It began with hair and scales, then full limbs, and, in the end, entire beasts. He bore no interest in humans, and cared nothing for spectral beings or the Lost Ones. Following a few rainy seasons — which the reader may consider akin to winters in our Heartland — he had grown so skillful in the use of forbidden magic that the summoning of animals from the desert lost its appeal. Those alternate realities, he found, were too similar to our own mundane plane. Though he witnessed great cats unlike anything found in our world, and gazed upon richly-colored, gangly birds, or observed jet-black Bone Rippers, in time the wild mage came to regard the exotic beasts with a studied eye. He designed special cages for the creatures he summoned, and took to observing them closely. The mage watched closely his specimens, sketching what he saw; and, satisfied with his drawings, returned the beasts to their own time and place. Research, you see, was his singular passion.

This wild mage, whose name remains forever lost to time, found himself adrift in the sea of endless realities, unable to orient himself, and so sought after a plane where time itself ran separate from our own. Quite to his surprise, the mage succeeded one day in anchoring his mind to a far-off world. Thrilled as he was by what he saw through the veil of distorted haze in that exotic plane, he soon managed to pull the first being he discovered into our reality. The beast proved a towering lizard vast as a battering ram, with menacing horns and a gigantic armored plate on the back of its skull. In his haste, the wild mage had failed to register the sheer size of the lizard, and soon paid the price for his hubris. When the portal from the distant world appeared and spat the gargantuan beast into its meager cage, the bars burst wide with a mighty crack like thunder. Perhaps feeling torn from its natural place and time, or perhaps terrified of the rending sound of the cage, the great monster raged at the wild mage — and drove one of its murderous horns through his eye.

Thus ends the story, and the life, of the wild mage. It is said that even today vagabonds might paw through the twisted remnants of the rusted cage, and find there traces of a skeleton weathered away by time and desert winds. Of the monstrous lizard from out of time, however, nothing remains, save the whispers which still breathe life into the ancient legend. They call it the Mountain in the Desert.

Myths and Legends Volume 5: The Steel Warden

written by Archmagister Gawayn Girathû, 8111 n. St.

A lesser known myth is the one of the "Steel Warden". Its lack of popularity is all the more astonishing considering it is one of the oldest mythological creatures of Enderal.

According to legends the Steel Warden was once called Ibraêl Râthu, a Half-Aeterna, who served in the ranks of Arcanists Dal'Marak's most trusted — who, as we all know, bears the blame for the devastation of the Thalgard region. It is said, that Ibraêl, a most path-abiding man, saw the disaster coming. More than once he has advised caution, which his master ignored.

One day — scarcely two moons later the catastrophe, which we know today as the "Sunfire", was bound to happen — he decided to act. Dal'Marak has strayed from the righteous path and Ibraêl knew it was his holy duty to stop him. This pained him to an unbearable extent, as he had served Dal'Marak for four decades.

Nevertheless he snuck into his master's chambers at night. Yet as he was huddling over his bed, the axe raised above his head, he suddenly froze midway through. With eyes dilated by terror he had to watch his skin turn grey and his back sprout prickly outgrowth. With his last vim he uncovered the sheets under which a human form loomed. It was a scarecrow.

Ever since it has been Ibraêl's destiny to wander the catacombs of the now ruined monastery, in which Dal'Marak had carried out his research. His will is bound to his old master by a manner of magic and even though he is already deceased the curse still lasts. Marauders, sunborn and lost have already tried to finish the rigid figure, but Dal'Marak's magic was too powerful: Neither fire, nor ice or poison can harm him and even the mightiest of blades just barely cut through his armour.

Night

Good Ending

The night surrounded the farmstead more intensely than usual. Thick clouds covered the night sky, blocking the light blue glint that used to be cast over the land. Except for some trees further uphill, fields surrounded the farm, but this night the soft green they shared with all fields of the Farmers Coast couldn't even be guessed.

At the attic of the house, a boy was still awake. A diffuse disturbance crept inside of his head. It might have been the oppressive darkness that kept him from sleeping, but the uneasiness wouldn't go away, so he took the courage and decided to go outside for a walk, where he might have freed himself of this feeling. To cast away the darkness at least a tiny bit, he took a lantern with a candle with him.

He knew exactly which steps of the old, wooden staircase were creaking, so he carefully avoided those and reached the kitchen in the basement almost silently. Through the window he could see the road behind the fields and noticed a cart, completely unlit, creeping forth the road to Ark. Quickly he turned around, stepped through the corridor and escaped through the back door into the night. He had just lit the candle to see the ground before him and passed the herb garden. What used to be a colourful and varied collection of all sorts of herbs became an unshaped grey-green in the dark. He then passed the well and went further to the big barn, when he noticed that many of the animals were nervous and awake as well. He climbed the ladder up to the attic where the hay was kept for the animals just below, and put the lantern on a workbench at the side. Then he stepped over to the large pile of hay and laid down on it like he often did on warm summer nights. He listened to the animals below, their snuffling, rustling and breathing, and closed his eyes. The animals could hear him as well, and they were used to the child's feet walking on the wooden planks above. He quickly fell asleep…

A loud squealing jolt him awake. Or did it just seem so loud as the silence sharpened his hearing? But before he could tell which pig woke him up, they calmed down again. Then he saw some light shining through a small window in the roof. He slowly got on his feet, and looked upwards through the wooden frame, where he could see some of the all familiar starlight breaking through the clouds. Then, all of a sudden, something grabbed him from behind, like claws clenching his shoulders. He tried to scream but he was voiceless. His gaze blackened, his arms got limp, his knees weakened. He was pushed forward, pulled back, thrown to the side, but not knocked over. Then, the grip loosened and the boy tumbled backwards, and before he could regain his balance, his right shoulder crashed into the workbench, throwing the lantern to the ground, where the glass shattered and the burning candle fell out.

Within a second some hay caught fire and, as if it was an innate reflex, he jumped and threw himself onto the flames. He could feel his shirt getting torn by the raw planks, and the glass shards and burning hay pressing into his skin. But the certainty of having prevented a fire and possibly the death of all animals was too much of a relief for him to notice. It must have been Malphas' favour that gave him this inhuman reflexes. Slowly, the boy turned around and looked upward. For a moment, through the window he saw the hideous, horned head, staring at him through horizontal pupils. A terrible coldness embraced him, but the creature disappeared and left him alone in darkness.

But if Malphas saved him, why did this creature appear in the first place? Why did it attack him, why did it let loose, would it return, was it a test, a trick, a curse or a spell? These questions whirled around in his head and kept him in this state of mind between consciousness and dream. And only as dawn had broken, his wounds slowly pulled him back into reality.

Bad Ending

The night surrounded the farmstead more intensely than usual. Thick clouds covered the night sky, blocking the light blue glint that used to be cast over the land. Except for some trees further uphill, fields surrounded the farm, but this night the soft green they shared with all fields of the Farmers Coast couldn't even be guessed.

At the attic of the house, a boy was still awake. A diffuse disturbance crept inside of his head. It might have been the oppressive darkness that kept him from sleeping, but the uneasiness wouldn't go away, so he took the courage and decided to go outside for a walk, where he might have freed himself of this feeling. To cast away the darkness at least a tiny bit, he took a lantern with a candle with him.

He knew exactly which steps of the old, wooden staircase were creaking, so he carefully avoided those and reached the kitchen in the basement almost silently. Through the window he could see the road behind the fields and noticed a cart, completely unlit, creeping forth the road to Ark. Quickly he turned around, stepped through the corridor and escaped through the back door into the night. He had just lit the candle to see the ground before him and passed the herb garden. What used to be a colourful and varied collection of all sorts of herbs became an unshaped grey-green in the dark. He then passed the well and went further to the big barn, when he noticed that many of the animals were nervous and awake as well. He climbed the ladder up to the attic where the hay was kept for the animals just below, and put the lantern on a workbench at the side. Then he stepped over to the large pile of hay and laid down on it like he often did on warm summer nights. He listened to the animals below, their snuffling, rustling and breathing, and closed his eyes. The animals could hear him as well, and they were used to the child's feet walking on the wooden planks above. He quickly fell asleep…

A loud squealing jolt him awake. Or did it just seem so loud as the silence sharpened his hearing? But before he could tell which pig woke him up, they calmed down again. Then he saw some light shining through a small window in the roof. He slowly got on his feet, and looked upwards through the wooden

frame, where he could see some of the all familiar starlight breaking through the clouds. Then, all of a sudden, something grabbed him from behind, like claws clenching his shoulders. He tried to scream but he was voiceless. His gaze blackened, his arms got limp, his knees weakened. He was pushed forward, pulled back, thrown to the side, but not knocked over. Then, the grip loosened and the boy tumbled backwards, and before he could regain his balance, his right shoulder crashed into the workbench, throwing the lantern to the ground, where the glass shattered and the burning candle fell out.

Within seconds the hay caught fire, but the boy struggled to get on this feet. As he realized what was happening, he grabbed the corner of the workbench and pulled himself up. At this point, a whole pile of hay was aflame already, and there was no chance to extinguish the flames anymore. He ran towards the ladder he used to get up there; at least the animals should be freed and saved from this inferno. But his legs could barely carry him, and he stumbled upon reaching the ladder, falling down head first to the ground. His left arm cracked upon the impact, his head hit the ground hard, and his right foot slapped on a rock beside the ladder. The blazing pain and the fear kept him conscious, but he could barely move. He got on his knees, crept towards the big gate and pushed his back up against the heavy wooden bar that kept the gate shut.

The screaming and squealing of the animals hit him like a nail in the head, he didn't even care about his injuries anymore. “Malphas, help me, why don't you”. Tears dropped from his eyes, and the anguish and shame and desperation suffocated him. No matter how hard he pushed, the bar wouldn't move a bit. Soon, the pigs were running against the gate, and he could hear them burn. With a final effort he crept away from the blazing barn until he lost his consciousness, even though the shrieking and gurgling of the animals kept cutting into his thoughts for some more time. He should have joined them…

Ostian - Capital of Nehrim's Southrealm

A mild summer evening, when being accompanied by the chirping of insects, is the most pleasant time to walk the sandy path to Ostian, lined by palm and leaf trees. In this region mostly hot temperatures prevail, although the weather can be moody at times. Then it covers the coast within a few hours in dense, damp fog.

As capital of the Southrealm is Ostian not only through its location, in Nehrim's most southern bay, of strategic importance. In close proximity to the canal that enters the sea gate, Ostian provides one of the trading hubs for the whole continent. Generally, the architecture of the city is adapted to the differences in altitude in the region. The most spectacular buildings are the big lighthouse, enthroned on its bastion, as well as the ostentatious residence of the temple. The unfinished lighthouse protrudes like a monolith above the roofs of the city. Up until now, it could not fulfill its function, as its construction has faltered in the last years. Designed by Nehrim's master builder Nishab Valori, it is supposed to ensure with its light that many trading ships find their safe way into the waiting arms of the city.

Below the protective walls of the bastion are the residential areas. Characteristics of the style of the simple buildings are the material, primarily wood, and their encapsulated disposition. For non experts the numerous footbridges and passageways connecting the houses can quickly dwindle into a maze. Inside the cliffs that encircle the structures are storage caves, long ago established by the city's residents, that keep supplies enjoyable for a decent amount of time. The waterfront, being worth a visit especially during sunset, offers a good view onto the bay opening to the wide ocean. Despite its unquestionable charm, Ostian also has dark, less picturesque parts. The working class quarter in the east is abandoned. Here, buildings string together that without maintenance slowly go to rack. Not only at night is this area better to be avoided, as it is unclear what lowlifes have nested within the houses. Another place that can transform in the right light into an eerie site are the old stone pits, not too far from the the working class quarter.

Towards the north it becomes however more bustling again. The market attracts many residents of the city, as the square with its chapel is key element to the life in Ostian. During the evening, the hustle and bustle shifts usually into a tavern, as for example the “Sinful Enclave” in which the folks tipple and booze until late into the night. The probably most exciting site of the city might be the arena. In here, reckless valiants proof themselves in battles of life and dead. There are even fights, in which participants have to ward off wolves and other wild predators. As reward for their efforts, victorious combatants receive a handsome amount of gold.

In regard to religion, the influence of the cult of the "Creator" is imprinting the beliefs of Ostian's residents. The temple, in possession of the complete political authority over the city and the whole Southrealm, enforces his judgment with an iron hand. Numerous shrines, soaring stone pillars, at their feet bloodstained sacrificial cups, have been erected in and around the city. They draw the attention of curious visitors and religious pilgrims likewise. Despite all their passion for exploration, travelers should never forget prudence, which is also in Ostian an attentive wayfarer's best companion. The carefree idyll of this place is elusive.

Tales of the Wanderer: The Archer from the Steppe

On my travels through Vyn I had a lot of interesting encounters, some of them with more, some of them with less, of a pleasant ending.

I met beings who could change their face like a woman does her clothing. Walking corpses. Lost Ones. Ghosts. Monsters that tried to tear me apart with their tusks and claws. The world's finest warriors and mages — even if they boasted with titles and deeds later revealed as lies. The madness and greed of two monstrosities, which, at first sight, might not appear to fit this tale,, but show what can become of humans in terrible distress …

Well, I could certainly tell a thing or two about it and entertain a lively crowd for several evenings. But I'm neither a minstrel nor a vagabond, whoring and drinking tavern to tavern. "The Wanderer" — that is my name.

The purpose of my never-ending journey is to find the fabled warriors of Vyn, and reveal their legendary fighting methods. Now, read what I have to tell you.

One day I found myself working my way through the steppes and rocky caves of the sandy mountains of Arazeal. It is said that there, in that barren wasteland, once lived the most dreaded marksman beyond the Spice Canal.

I had already heard stories about this warrior: "Old Man" — is what the pockmarked drunk called me who told me about him in a shabby pub located in the harbour of the great city of Al-Rashim, on the coast of Qyra. He reeked of seaweed, fish and saltwater, and was clearly a sailor who has seen much of the world. "Take of your hood. I want to see who I'm talking to. Oh, what a fine scar you have there. Got it from a fight, eh? Guess you ducked down a little late there, Gramps. Your right eye doesn't look too healthy either; those colors aren't normal. You might want to get that checked out. But let's get back to the matter at hand. Did you hear the latest rumour from Arazeal?" he announced with a thick Endralean accent.

I looked sharply at the poor devil, and shook my head, even though I knew very well about the one who had reduced the number of bandits in the Sandy Mountains in a short amount of time to just a handful. "They call him the 'Avenger of the Desert Dust'. By the gods, some fiend he is; inhuman, and tremendously mighty. They say that he kills without his victims even noticing — not until it is too late, anyway. One moment you are alive, the next you are dead. You really shouldn't get in the way of someone like that." Then he leaned forward and hushed his voice. "They say he can bend time itself to his will."

After continuing my research I set out to see that man with my own eyes. I traveled through the barren mountains, asking around the settlements of nomads, but no one knew the identity of the mysterious marksman, or where I could meet him. It was several weeks before I came across a promising opportunity. At midday, under the sun's burning gaze high above, I climbed a tall ridge and suddenly heard the sounds of a battle. This was what I was searching for.

I followed the noise and hid behind some rocks for cover. It could hardly be called a battle anymore. It was such a short encounter, I could scarcely believe it had even occurred.. It was five against one: A peddler, slim and of tall stature — probably Arazealean — was threatened by a group of bandits. They knocked over his cart and killed the Steppe Beast pulling it. A dark red puddle pooled from under the massive carcass. The man was pleading for his life as the bandits tormented and harassed him. It was the perfect bait for the "Avenger of the Powder Desert". He didn't even make them wait for long.

Suddenly, a peculiar feeling came over me. I immediately recognized it as the feeling of magic at work — over the years, I had developed a sixth sense for it. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a hooded figure carefully creeping towards the bandits, with movements as dextrous as a cat's. The next moment the figure raised a hand and lightning and fire rained down on the clueless bandits. The figure then sprang up, revealing a bow, and knocked an arrow — and that's it happened.

Silence at first, then a strange whirring. The environment changed before my eyes as everything was suddenly engulfed in a drab, grey sludge. Each blink of an eye passed like an eternity. Everything was trapped in the spell cast by the stranger. I knew what he had done, felt how he dragged another reality out of the ocean of possibilities into life, and how it became the new reality. Resting in between all of that were fractions and tiny splinters of time itself. For the stranger, the river of time was unchanged; he moved about as if standing in the centre of a roaring cyclone. I swiftly eluded myself from his power with the help of a warding spell.

My second, special eye caught the arrows which whirled through the air, each followed quickly by a spectral arrow. As the spell subsided, the bandits were lying at the feet of the peddler — dead, pierced several times by multiple pointed projectiles. I couldn't believe my eyes. The stranger walked towards the peddler, made sure he was unharmed, and shoved a purse of coin into his hand to compensate for the broken cart and the pack animal. He did it in utter silence, without uttering a single word.

Then the stranger disappeared in a cloud of dust, though not before casting a glance my hiding spot. He knew that I was there. I rose. The marksman was, I realized, was of slight stature. He had piercing green eyes the color of poison, with long lashes and a red strand of hair coiling from under the scarf, covering head and most of his face. Not a marksman, I realized, but a markswoman. After she left, I accompanied the peddler to the next settlement.

I never met the warrior again, but what I saw was sufficient to convince me of her talents.

Based on the combination of conventional mental and elemental magic she used to preemptively strike down the bandits, coupled with her ability with the bow and uncanny stealth, I decided to name her fighting technique the "Arcane Archer". If you also put her most powerful talent of slowing down time into consideration, it adds up to a pattern that turns this warrior into one of the deadliest ranged fighters in the world. The only question I still ask myself is where she got the riches from to compensate the trader, as she lived in a poor region and the nomads surely had not enough to pay her for her deeds. They used to circulate rumours around Arazeal, that a magically gifted noble's daughter — well-known by the people as cheeky brat, of brisk and rebellious temper — ran, for no apparent reason, away from home at one of the civilized coast cities. They say she took part of the family treasure from the Vol Tis, probably as some kind of revenge on her overly-strict father. Physical features of this noble family were green eyes and red hair …

Tales of the Wanderer: The Blade Master

"Blademaster" is how many call themselves, even though they barely know how to hold a sword the right way. Most amusing about this is that most of them stop being daring and big-mouthed as soon as one is close to finish them off. Then they beg and crave. For their lives. For mercy. Vow on Malphas and the world. A real blademaster does not beg. If he kneels down, then only, to receive the last, lethal swordstroke. There exist just a few of these unyielding warriors. This story spins around the fate of such a man, who I met on my journeys. A man, for whom nothing was more sweet that death itself.

"You must be kidding" I huffed disgruntled. "So much? For one loaf? Where are we here? In some Qyranian noble house of pleasure?"

"That is the price for strangers, no more, no less", persisted the trader. "It brings you joy to squeeze people out for their last coin, doesn't it? Let me tell you something: This often falls back on one's own." I handed the man the demanded sum and grabbed my bread. "Have a nice day, Mysir", he said with a malicious smile on his face. "Burn in the sunfire" I grunted back.

The streets of the city were bustling. Around midday this was usually the case, it was the hour of the big deals for the traders and bargaining and haggling became competitions. I was only passing through, but had to replenish my supplies. — A week long walk until the Frostcliff Mountains was ahead of me. If you believe me or not, this trader had still offered me the best deal of all of them. The prices were currently at a horrendous level, especially for travellers. Yes, travellers were the preferred target if it was about leaving somebody flat. I sighed and took a look into my sachet. There was not much left.

Soon I would have to come up with a creative solution, if my luck would continue to mean such bad to me. Back then I was not as experienced, it was one of my first great travels across Enderal. There was a lot that I first had to learn on the hard and rough streets, a lot that my extensive training with the masters could not prepare me for. It is like with a child: You can give them a hand, but in the end it has to learn walking itself. Somehow the people were restless, I had observed, even without the use of my special eye and enhanced senses. It was in the air. If I had asked around more, I would have known earlier what was going on. So I just came to know now, when loud screaming resounded. I stretched myself over the crowd. A young fellow ran up the street.

"Today is the day! The time has come! The scoundrel is being dragged to the scaffold! Everybody come and see, the time has come, they string him up! Down at the market!" Simultaneously, loud bell-ringing echoed over the roofs of the city. The people turned their heads. Windows and doors were

opened. Little by little nearly all of the citizens made their way towards the market square. Flustered whispering could be heard everywhere.

When the noisy squaller passed me by, I reached out and caught him. His legs swung forwards, I quickly prevented him from falling. “What's happening here?”, I asked bleak. He looked at me scared. My cowl must seem frightening. “Uh, Uh, th-the scoundrel, he is going to be hanged, Mysir”, stuttered the lad. “Who is this “scoundrel” supposed to be?” I demanded to know.

“The bleeding blade, the cutthroat who slaughtered three moons ago a dozen members of the Order.” I let him go. He threw suspicious looks at me while slowly moving on. I had not heard of a twelvefold murder in the area. And I had a good overview of all men, who would be capable of doing such an act of violence. There was obviously something wrong with this case. I made my way towards the market, to have a closer look into this affair.

A vast crowd of people had gathered on the square. The whole city was on its feet. In the middle of the square stuck out the pedestal with the three gallows, on them freshly bond ropes, like a sinister omen. I pushed myself through the mass of people further towards the front. It was not long before murmuring started around the the eastern side of the square. The source of noise shifted further and further until it reached the podest. Then I saw the troop. Five Keepers, armed to the teeth, carried a man within their middle. He had long, straggly hair, that hung before his face.His body seemed maltreated. They probably had kept him in the “Hole”, the most inhuman cell of the dungeon, not even wide enough to turn while laying. For this reason, even his last reserves of strength must have depleted. Ahead of the troop walked the executioner, wearing a black and red hood.

The captive was being led on the pedestal, on which a luxuriously dressed spokesman, with a brooch of the Order on his chest, had taken up position. They knocked the captive hard so that he fell on his knees. He looked all time to the ground, he did not make any move. This man was broken, he had accepted his fate. A stone flew out of the crowd and hit his head. He grunted, bared his teeth without looking up and shook off the throw as if nothing had happened. Blood trickled down under his hear. It dripped on the podest.

“This man!” the spokesman pointed his finger on the captive and spitted on the ground.“This man, whose name is not worth it to be even mentioned, killed twelve- I repeat- twelve of our best warriors, honourable and bravemen, in cold blood.” The crowd seethed. Shouts of defamation echoed over the square. “In the night of the twenty-seventh Fundament, he assaulted them during their innocent sleep. Half of them were dead before even awaking.” A dramatic pause of the spokesman followed. “The only acceptable punishment for this is death.” The crowd consented roaring.“But dear people. It would be presumptuous if that would be all of it. Before he dies, he has to suffer the same agonies as those, that he left behind by the wayside with their throats cut, this scabious bastard son of a fisher whore!”, screamed the speaker.“Bring the rack!” Two sturdy Keepers rolled the instrument of torture over the ramp on the pedestal. The captive did not show any reaction to what was lying ahead of him.

“He still has not confessed his murderous acts in the face of Malphas. Until this has not happened, this pathless will also not receive any mercy!”

Frenetic cries of joy accompanied the words of the speaker. The captive was grabbed and buckled to the rack. The straps were lashed up. The spokesman signaled the executioner with a nod to begin his work. Arms and legs of the captive strained, while the executioner turned the crank. Not one sound left his throat. He stayed completely calm. The speaker gave another sign and the executioner continued turning. The same procedure followed a few more times, but the captive kept a stony silence. Anxious mumblings started amongst the bystanders. The speaker got nervous and hastily whispered something to the executioner. I suspected that there was something amiss here. No normal man could ever endure such an agonizing, cruel torture, without showing any hint of pain. Apart from strong drugs or other medicines there existed only one technique that allowed to completely dismiss any such pain. The Iron Cloak, only used by the highest master level of the blademasters, the Tyrangalar, a very famous ancient federation, of which many legends tell stories.

“Release him”, the speaker said with a snarl. “We will chop off his fingers one after the other”. The captured blademaster was dragged to the decapitation block. He did not fight back, his limbs were flaccid. His spirit was in a different state of mind. One Keeper chucked the arm of the captive into the block. The executioner sharpened his mutilation knife, which was as long as his forearm. He put the stone aside, placed himself above the captive, reached back and stroke out. But the knife never reached its target. I felt the magic, energetic shock wave that blew across the square, not perceptible for common people. The Iron Cloak had been released. In the next moment, the captive rose upwards. The iron shackle burst, as if it was made from ailing wood. He reached for the wrist of the baffled executioner and broke it with a skilful hold. Then he took the knife and pressed it into the side of the executioner's throat. He died immediately.

The marketplace went into uproar. The people, in blazing fear, pushed away from the pedestal. On the contrary, I pushed towards the pedestal. The five Keepers of the Order drew their weapons. The speaker tried to make himself scare but he did not make it far. The blademaster pulled the knife out of the executioner's throat and hurled it. It hit the runaway exactly in the back of the head, leaving him slump to the ground, dead but still twitching for a little while longer. Two dead men within two blinks of the eye.

This man was a dead machine. You probably can imagine what he did to the Keepers. But I will not withhold the details from you. The first to approach him: a dynamic move upwards, a kick in the privates, an uppercut under the jaw, simultaneously the knife from upside down into the unprotected neck. Dead. Now the blademaster found himself in possession of his favorite weapon.

The second warrior of the Order: a severed arm, then a stroke through his heart. Preceded was all that by various matchless feints. The blademaster dodged with a somersault under a blow, while cutting into the knee pit of the third attacker, using his sword to nail the attacker's foot into the pedestal. When

the fourth enemy approached, the blademaster gave him a deafening hit onto both ears, took away his weapon, used it to kill the third one, drew the blade out of his foot and ran it into the fourth's throat. Double score for death. The fifth Keeper had already made a quick getaway, like everyone who was reasonably in his right senses. The torture and the time in the cell could not harm the blademaster at all. I was not surprised by that. These fighters put themselves into artificial sleep, lasting for days, and buried themselves in chambers deep down in the earth. The blademaster jumped from the pedestal. I was the only one still standing there. Between us were just a few steps. He stormed in my direction. My muscles tensed, but I was too slow. Now it was impossible to still dodge. He was fast as a lightning flash. My breath paused. In a fraction of a moment our eyes crossed, while he passed me by. I just kept standing there, glued to the spot. At my shoulder, the shirt was ripped open and revealed a cut, so thin that I barely noticed it. My heart started beating again.

I turned around and saw the blademaster making his way up the street, followed by a troop of Keepers. It took way too long until I started moving again to follow them as well. His combat style was extraordinary like no other. Under no circumstances did I want to miss the end of his dramatic escape. A swath of destruction lay throughout the street. I saw the trader who had sold me the exorbitantly expensive bread. He was lying dead under the debris of his market stall. Apparently he had tried to hastily save all his property. A few innocents wallowed in their own blood, the ones that did not make it away quick enough. Finally, at the city gate, the Keepers headed him off and circumvented him. He saw himself surrounded by an overwhelming superior number of enemies. I arrived, gasping for air and leaned myself against one building wall. The Keepers created a circle with their halberds facing towards the blademaster. One man emerged from the troop and stepped inside the circle. My eyes widened. When I woke up this morning from my hard bed between blackberry bushes and thorns, I could never have imagined that I would experience such a spectacular situation like this. The one who stepped forward to the blademaster was Ragis Starseeker, at this time the very best swordsman of the Order and formerly student of the legendary Loram Waterblade. He had long, black flowing hair and was an outright handsome fellow. But his sharp cheekbones and the flawless complexion were just giving the impression of a gentle soul. His blade however was the most lethal weapon in all of Enderal.

Ragis took determined steps towards the blademaster, stopping in a respectful distance. Silence, like before a storm. There was not the slightest breath of wind. Suddenly, the blade whooshed out of Ragis' scabbard forwards. At the same time, the blademaster snatched his weapon upwards. The swords crossed with a loud clank in the middle and both opponents halted. “Name?”, Ragis asked in a calm voice. “Eremir. Fifth of the Chiming Shadows”, the blademaster responded. His voice reminded me of a gnarling, old wooden plank, floating through a river. “A Chiming Shadow…” Ragis' brow went upwards. “Well that is interesting. I would like to offer you a fair deal: Surrender, and you stay alive, Eremir. I do not want to kill you, it would be a terrible waste to the whole world. We can discuss everything in peace, without crossing blades. Choose the path of reason.”

“Do not act so innocent now. You knew exactly who I am. And I have already experienced what a ‘fair deal’ with the Order really means”, Eremir spitted. “You did not treat me fairly, you did not offer me any justice. I did not murder these people. They attacked me, I suppose following your commands to do so, Ragis. You are human scum. A deceitful snake without honour, determined to exterminate people such as me. You want to get rid of the Chiming Shadows and the Tyrangalar. You see them as a threat for your reputation, your cause. You have shrewdly turned it all on me. If you do not let me pass, a fight will break out.”

Ragis' mouth changed from a relaxed grin to a straight, soulless wrinkle. “Believe me, then you will also die”, Eremir said sharply. Ragis took a step back and dropped his cloak. “You asked for it.” He loosened the cuffs and collar of his jerkin. On top of it, his reinforced leather armour glimmered with golden ornaments.Then he extended his arm, pointing his sword towards his enemy. With grim expression on his face, Eremir emulated the movement.

The two opponents circled around each other, watching the other furtively, like feline predators, for the slightest sign of chance. Ragis flipped forward, with the elegance of an attacking viper. Eremir parried the attempt without any struggle. The blades danced and sparked a silver swirling storm. The permanence and velocity of the fighters was unrivalled. The smallest mistake would decide the outcome of the duel. I followed the clash, mesmerized by the storm of the swords. After fierce, acrobatic maneuvers, Ragis found himself one step ahead. With an insidious smile he dived under Eremir's approaching blade and hit him at the abdominal wall. It was a comparably small cut, but with serious consequences. Eremir tumbled backwards and hold his hand on the wound. Ragis directly tried to follow up but his tackle got dashed back.

“You are hiding behind your armour, coward!”, Eremir snapped. Ragis grin turned dreadful. He signaled two Keepers to him to take off his leather armour. “Now we are equal”, he said. His black hair was sticking to his forehead now. He took a delicate silk cloth and swiped the sweat away, then moved back into fighting position. Eremir was facing him, swathed only in his off-colour rags.

The storm restarted. The whirling, the dancing, the search for a weak point in the defense of the opponent. Eremir's movements were followed by a track of blood, dripping on the stones. The longer the fight would take, the more this wound would take a toll on him and I doubted if he had enough strength left to perform the Iron Cloak another time. In a sudden hurricane both blades met. They grinded along each other, rasping, in the face of their carriers. Abruptly, Ragis grabbed with his free hand Eremir's arm, who could not hinder it anymore. An awful munching resonated. The blade slowly pierced through his body, until it came out on the backside again. Ragis pushed forward and Eremir spat blood. The sword stuck. Ragis smiled satisfied, while the blood of his enemy stained his jerkin.

“The Chiming Shadows are not what they used to be. You quickly gav-”

He abruptly fell silent. His eyes stared bewildered and unbelieving down on Eremir's sword, which stuck in his stomach. The older blademaster thrust it with all his power through. Ragis rattled, and between his clenched up teeth flowed out blood. His face was petrified. His face lost all its colour.

"A fight is not over, before you have assured that your opponent is dead. This was a lethal mistake.Waterblade taught you well, but it seems he left out the most important lesson", Eremir coughed with a bittersweet smile on his lips. "I warned you that you would die as well."

They both spitted blood. The Keepers around them watched the spectacle motionless and in silence — numbed in awe. Ragis face turned into a grimace, filled with infinite hatred, but before he could respond something, his head sacked down. Eremir looked up to the sky. "Ah." It sounded as if he was finally free now, as if a heavy burden was taken from him.

"Death, sweet death, rip my heart out of my chest!" he shouted, and the roar echoed from the houses around."Now I finally see you again, my dear Iona." Then he fell silent. The whole city — no — the whole world seemed to lapse into silence. Somewhere, high on top of a tree, a ruddock started chirping.

Tales of the Wanderer: The Dark Keeper

Magic is a double-edged sword. While the gleaming side of the blade aids men — curing our illnesses, closing our wounds and easing our daily lives — its darker twin holds far more temptations for weak souls, though they come at a high price. Invariably, the shadowy side of the mighty sword extracts its payment from the lives of those who would entrust themselves to it, twisting and using them to further its goals. Sinistra, the school which teaches that magic, is understandably ostracized on civilized continents. It concerns itself with powers that should not be toyed with the manipulation of innermost thoughts and of life and death themselves. As the saying goes, "What is dead should remain dead."

During my travels, I, encountered Sinistra; not just once, and certainly not because I practiced it myself — no, I would not dare to take even a single step in such a direction. But every continent has its secret retreats where such magic is practiced, dark gorges lacking solid ground and hope. Since my duty as a wanderer commands me to regularly enter the worlds of eclipse and beyond, I can give account of a warrior with arcane talents who achieved mastery over the art of fighting with forbidden magic. Our encounter was more by chance than intent…

It cracked and thundered. Lightning cast the parlor in its garish, ghostly glare and made candle and chimney fires flicker upwards. Rain pounded against the windows and on the roof. Outside, the wind shook the walls, howling and screaming between every thunderclap. I had before me a steaming bowl of cabbage soup. Its sour stench tickled my nostrils as I took a spoonful, blew, and ate. The soup was awful, but it was also the only fare on offer, apart from a particularly stale hunk of bread. All the same, I have eaten worse. The shabby inn had seen better days; it was on its starting to come apart at the seams, one might say. It rained an awful lot in that region — almost every day in the period between winter's bite and summer's burn — and that didn't do the wood any favors. The inn and the village it belonged to were nestled in the Dark Vale, and it couldn't have been more aptly named In one corner of the inn, soldiers from the Order were busy carousing, singing and bawling and pulling the young serving wenches into their laps. Most other patrons were peasants and farmers.

"How's it suit you?", the buxom landlady with red cheeks and patterned apron asked. Her husband owned the tavern. She was cleaning the neighboring table, where an old swashbuckler snored away the evening.

I twisted my mouth in response.

"Well, you better be thankful we've still got cabbage. Snails robbed us of all the rest. Out of nowhere, they started multiplying and wouldn't stop, until we finally found a way to get rid of them."

“Did you hire a mage to take a look at your fields?”

“Aye, we had one of them around here. Do you have the second sight, or do you simply know more than others, foreigner?”

“Because of my grey hair and the wrinkles, you mean? Don't let yourself be fooled, my dear — there's more youth in me yet than you might think. I can taste his novice's spell in the soup.” I replied with a tired grin.

The landlady laughed heartily. “Who are you, anyway? Most folks with any decent jokes don't usually end up here.”

“I'm a wanderer.”

“One with a name?”

“I have none and there doesn't need to be one.”

'Oh-ho the mysterious type, ain't we? Have it your way. What do you want in our town, wanderer?” I sipped at my stale beer. Outside, it thundered again, this time louder.

“Just passing through on my way to the North Wind Mountains.”

“Well, you didn't choose the best time to make your journey. It's gotten mighty dangerous since the rebels took up camp in the valley,” she said, glancing at the drunken men of the Order.

“Is that why all these soldiers are in the villages?”

She nodded.

“These rebels are criminals, the whole lot of them. They should all be hanged. They tore in here last spring, expecting we'd be willing to give up our land so they can hide out from the authorities. Oh yes, they thought, let's draw the peasants into our schemes. But there they are mistaken. I'm not going to be punished as some sneak-thief's accomplice! It's not been easy for us, that much is true, but before risking death I'd rather it stays the way it is. I just can't understand how there can be so many southerners supporting them; they're just causing trouble everywhere they go…”

I ignored the landlady's while she chattered to herself and turned my attention outside. Something was happening there, though clearly no one else had heard it. But I heard it through the door crack — the heavy, iron-shod boots thudding in the puddles on the street, the horses snorting in the wet cold. Someone was coming. Instinct took over, and I clutched the hilt of the blade hidden under my cloak. The soldiers' cries of laughter were interrupted by thunder, but this time it was not the storm.The door burst open, almost ripping it from the hinges. The silhouette of a tall man was illuminated by the flash of lightning, which revealed the figure in his heavy, black armor as he stood in the doorframe. The tapered helmet hid his countenance and everything about him seemed deadly and sharp, as if one could

cut his eyes by gazing upon his armor. He bore an enormous sword on his belt, glittering dangerously in the storm. Most dangerous of all, though, was, the crest painted on his shield bearing the red-on-black hammer that was the sigil of Kilana Hammerschlag. For a moment the inn held its breath. Then the high-pitched shriek of a woman terrified out of her wits cut through the silence. The half-drunk Order soldiers stumbled clumsily to their feet as the terrible man ducked through the doorway.He was followed by two lackies bearing the rebel sigil less tall and well armored.

“Get yourself gone, rebel! You ain't welcome here,” a soldier slurred.

The warrior in black armor advanced wordlessly.

“Take to your heels before we cut your legs off!” another man added, sounding less than confident in the face of the giant

“You stink of snake, little one — and of piss-beer.” the rebel said, voice black as tar and murderously low.

“Get lost, you whoreson-” The soldier choked on the word. With an ugly sound, the rebel's sword cleaved him in two. The men of the Order yanked their weapons up, but did not dare to attack the giant.

“No harm will come to you if you don't interfere,” the rebel announced to the patrons, who cowered under the tables. A few seized the opportunity and fled outside.

“I'm afraid the same can't be said for you, though.” He pointed to the soldiers.

An icy feeling of terror settled over the inn as the warrior murmured an incantation. I heard the words clearly — like an echo, they reverberated, although he made no noise. I rose, with my hands tightly clutched around the hilt.

“Sorcery! A wild mage! Run or he'll steal your souls!” one of the patrons panicked as he ran to the door.

I had never seen a mage of the forbidden arts in the rebels' ranks. Either dear Kilana has changed her recruitment criteria or something here was rotten. I suspected the latter.

One of the soldier's eyes turned inward, he suddenly lurched, as if out of his mind, and wheeled around with his sword, past friend and foe.

“Eltin, what are you doing?! Why are you attacking me?!”

His neighbor cursed. Utter chaos erupted. More mutters from the rebel. The next incantation, the next one collapsing, the next one attacking his comrades. Jugs bursting, tables being knocked over; panicked shrieks, explosions from who knows where, the soldier's blood splattering on the planks, the soldiers who were killing each other. They did not have the ghost of a chance. The warrior laughed madly while

observing the massacre with relish. Calmly, he watched how his puppets dancing until no living foe remained.

"Behold what happens to those sticking to the Order — ah!" He shouted surprised. One of the peasants had grabbed a pitchfork and stabbed him right under the shoulder plate.

"You vile peasant!"

He pulled the pitchfork out and impaled the peasant against the wall. He choked; coughing blood like a gargoyle — then his head slowly sank to his chest. The bystanders were still awestruck as the giant looked at the blood flowing out under his armor plates. He walked to the corpses and put out his hand above them. My right eye, the one with the special vision, betrayed it: He absorbed their energy, healing his wounds with the powers of the dead. Then he shuddered.

"That was a mistake. I wanted to spare you — well, it's a real shame with your pretty room. Go on ahead, I'll be there in — let's say two moments." he said to his companions and sent them outside.

He sat himself at the counter and tossed the contents of another man's cup under his visor. I anticipated what he intended. A wizard with such powers would be able to raze the inn and the surrounding fields to the ground — the people included. I could not allow that.

"You will never lay a finger on these people again."

I had positioned myself behind the warrior, prepared to do what was necessary. Slowly, he turned around, eyeing me suspiciously. A muffled laugh clang under the helmet.

"Bold. But I doubt you can so much as hold a sword with your hunch, old man."

He calmly rose to his feet. "Don't waste the last years of your life. Attacking me is pointless. I am immortal."

He wanted to take a step towards me, but I raised the hand I had concealed under my cloak. The counterspells had already been cast, all precautions made. Suddenly, the warrior paused midstride, as if petrified.

"What — what are you doing?" he asked angrily and tried to move, without success.

"You seem to believe your dark magic will protect you from everything. You were mistaken."

"Leave me be!" he screamed.

I advanced, raised my voice until the walls were shaking, grabbed the warrior at his helmet and, with iron will, forced him on his knees.

"Here, nothing remains for you to be done. You caused enough suffering. I know that you do not belong to the rebels. You pursue your own goals, in the name of what you might call justice. But mark

my words, whoever you are and whatever evil dwells inside you: With your dark powers you cause harm to innocents and punish them for deeds committed by their masters and not them. Someday, your foul magic will eat your heart out. You will go, now, without protest. And when I learn that you and your men returned to attack the villagers, I will find and kill you. Have you understood?"

He nodded under fearful whimpering. He rose and hurried straight out of the door. Shortly after, a rataplan of hooves reached us from the street — the men rode out of the village at a gallop.

I braced myself on my sword — weakness washed over me like a surging billow.

The process had cost much of my strength. Drops of sweat ran over my forehead and my sight became unclear, colorful lights were sparkling at the fringes of my viewing range. Slowly, the villagers approached me.

"Sir Wanderer, are you hurt?"

"No." I said. "I am fine. It is high time to leave this region. I've already been here too long."

"But you need to rest, please. You saved us, we owe you our thanks." I broke away and limped to the door, braced on my cane. On the threshold, I turned.

"Burn the corpses. Bodies defiled by forbidden magic seldom stay dead for long. Then leave this place."

I stepped outside, into the raging storm and pulled my hood over. The landlady's, her husband's and the other villagers' voices were swallowed by the pattering rain.

In the following years, I heard many tales of that arcane warrior in black armor, whose forbidden arts and cold-bloodedness spread terror on battlefields and in the Order's ranks. It transpired that he led an independent sub-group of rebels, who had broken away from Kilana Hammerschlag. I cannot say where came from originally, but I doubt he ever set foot in that village again. Back then, I probed into the darkest caverns of his consciousness to awake his deepest fears and forever bind them to that village. That certainly did not protect the inhabitants from other dangers, and neither they nor the other settlements in the Dark Valley were spared from the devastations of the conflict. I will call the combat style of that warrior in his heavy, dark plate armor, who knew the arts of Sinistra, the "Dark Keeper".

Tales of the Wanderer: The Seraph

I'm sitting here, old and gray. My feet once carried me through all times and countries. Yet I've slowly come to realize that my body, my magical senses grow weak. My peregrination is coming to an end. I'm sitting here, gazing into the flickering fire with which I'm warming my hands in this cold and naked parlour of an inn, the likes of which I visited hundreds of times. Eventually the seem as alike as two peas in a pod. My quill scrapes across the parchment as a storm is approaching outside. I sense it coming for a long time now, the dark clouds it brings along in its wake. Everything will change, you'll see. The flow of this world is turning. Perhaps this is also the reason why my time to perish draws near. This legend about extraordinary fighters was once passed on to me by a wise man. It reminds us that no matter how dark the night might seem, a new dawn is always waiting for us. And it's one of my final tales.

A long time ago there lived a man, a Keeper of the Order, an ambassador of Malphas. For this man the worst thing to experience was to see sorrow, no matter if it was in humans or animals. This trait arose from his childhood, which he never talked about, with no soul. It's not that this man, which we will call "Seraph" for now, rallied a whole lot of trusted people around him. In fact he actually was very lonely and sad human. Nearly every being puts a protective layer around its heart over the course of its lifetime, to shield it from inner anguish. The Seraph however left his heart open and unprotected. He gave everything he was capable to give to others.

In his numerous battles for the Order he never killed an enemy. As a Keeper, trained in fighting one-on-one, this is most extraordinary. He concentrated on leading his comrades out of battle unharmed and in one piece. He strengthened them with spells, put up magic wards through Mentalism to intercept the rain of arrows. If necessary, he protected the injured with his own body. The light of his magic healed their wounds, no matter how terrible they were, and if they were too grave, he cradled them into their death, remaining on their side to the last breath. With his heavy plating he stood as firm as a rock, a ray of light in the midst of the battle. Friends and foes alike thanked him for it and bowed before his mercy.

In times of peace he provided the beggars and orphan children of the Undercity with food which he secretly stole from the pantries of the Order. He treated the injuries of the whores abused by their brutal masters. If they wanted to express their gratitude for his service afterwards he abstinently withdrew. He would have never accepted a reward. Everything he did, he did to make the the world a better place. For he saw what pain can cause, how cities were set ablaze. — He saw all the anguish, let it pass into his heart. He wanted that no one else had to feel the same grief as he did.

However, his generous deeds were not welcomed by everyone. There were several high-ranking members of the Order who disliked his actions. Their malicious tongues spoke ill of him, said that he does not stand behind their cause if he could not destroy the enemies of Malphas, but instead keeping them alive. They convinced the Grandmaster and threatened him to revoke his permissions and his title as Keeper of the Order. He was given a choice: He had to either execute a prisoner of war or he had to leave the Order.

This devious plan finally broke him. The sheer sight of the pleading man to his feet overpowered him with pitifulness. The sword sank out of his fingers and fell rattling down to the ground. He decided to turn his back on the Order. The ineffable misery that filled him after that, he fought the way he was used to: with light. He gave away all his belongings, even his home, to the poor, until he had nothing left but the clothing on his body. A tremendous sacrifice, though it did not cause him the slightest bit of trouble.

Before long the severe winter came. He had no shelter, no warm clothes to protect him from the cold. One night it was that bad that he, leaning against the exterior wall of a house, could already feel the comforting embrace of death around his shoulders. One of the children he helped saw him sitting there. Swiftly it ran off and brought his friends. The word spread like wildfire. Soon they gathered around him, those which he helped making their life easier. The orphan children, the elderly, the beggars, the whores. They surrounded and hugged the Seraph, warmed him like a large blanket until the sun rose above the roofs of the city.

Tales of the Wanderer: The Shadow Dancer

The guiding principle of eternal wandering is both a blessing and a curse. No one sees the world the way I do — in its rawest and most primal form, behind the countless veils covering her, with a gaze undimmed by hate or gullibility. My fate as a wanderer had already begun upon leaving my mother's womb. The training that turned me into what I am now required complete suppression of all feelings. It was harsh and exhausting, and aimed at total concentration on a single task. I am sure you are wondering what point there could be in collecting and compiling information on this world's combat styles. If only you knew… no one, not even I myself can comprehend it. It serves a higher purpose. It is a life's work. From the time just after finishing my education in the Master's monastery, many adventurous stories arise. This is one of them, one of the first.

Something was different that day. Ravens sitting on the gables announced it. The air pressed on my shoulders, heavy as if it were a chain of massive stone. The sun had not yet risen; and in the night there had been frost. Wafts of mist lay over the harbor of Ark. Coming from the sea; they meandered through the alleys as ghostly, snake-like creatures. The bystander's breath soared to the dim sky as little clouds of steam. They gathered at the spot where it had happened. Some were dockers, one a beggar. No one else had appeared yet, though now it would not take much longer for the alley to fill.

“Poor buggers. That's got to be the fifth murder this month. I'm beginning to take fright now. Just look at the amount of blood, and that one's skull — mashed like a ripe tomato. There's got to be a madman skirting round. ”, one of the dockers said with a husky voice.

“This one even had his personal guard with him … still didn't do him any good. It has to be a damn strong madman, killing people like that ”, another one commented.

I pulled down my hood. There was not much time anymore. The guards would appear soon enough, and it was unlikely they would be inclined to let anyone through. Three corpses. Parts of one still stuck to the wall his murderers had smashed it against, the twisted remainder lying below. The other two were spread along the alley. Bizarre white signs were painted on the walls, probably as some form of deterrent. The people were supposed to believe this to be the work of some obscure secret society. I crouched down before one of the dead. He lay on his back. The time of death was difficult to determine, the cold making any accurate estimate impossible. The man was well-fed. His fine garments were sprinkled with blood and a metallic badge hung around his neck. A rich merchant, member of the Golden Sickle. I grabbed his head, pulled his mouth corner up and sniffed.

“What do you think you're doing, lad? He's dead, nothing will change that. ”

I didn't answer. The odor coming out of the corpse's mouth. In the third chamber of senses, in the monastery, they made me smell it for days so I would always be able to recognize it. It was hardly noticeable anymore. A foul mixture of addled eggs and soot. His throat was cut through and left only one possible conclusion: Stabbed from behind, with a very, very sharp blade. The skin was not fringy and the cut smooth, smoother than cuts from a razor blade. The merchant's personal guards had died under the influence of enormous bodily power. The manner of their deaths were very different from another — too different. Something here was suspicious. I arose. The laborers were muttering already. "Who is that? "

"What does he want here? "

"Maybe he is involved in the whole affair. You know, sometimes those freaks come to look at their bloody deed back and knock one out. "

"Wasn't that one here last week, nosing around? "

"I'm getting the guards…"

One of them bolted away. For me, it was time to go. I had already disappeared in the streets when they turned. In my attic room at the inn I put my findings down and summarized the insights I had gained:

Five murders. Five high-ranking merchants of the Golden Sickle. This had ceased to be coincidental a long time ago. There was a reason the last one had guards with him. Someone was out to get the merchants. The possibility of a personal feud couldn't be dismissed — merchants make lots of enemies during their lives. But that would make it a case for the city guard. What made it my responsibility was this clue. Magic. The suspicious odor. A clear indicator for the use of Entropy, forbidden magic, in each of the three cases I personally had the chance to investigate since the series began.

My old friend, the Apothecarius Belius Braungrind, who was working for the Order, immediately contacted me when the first victims appeared on his examination table. Though the whole city watch was on alert, the murderer had been able to continue his sinister doings, utilizing new tricks every time. But I feared he would sooner or later make a mistake and be captured. Before that happened and his head ended up rolling through the streets of Ark, I had to witness him and his incomparably powerful ways to kill. If what I concluded was true, there was only one person he could attack next: the head of the Golden Sickle — Evan Dal'Volar.

I was Dal'Volar's shadow in the following days. If one travels as much as I do, one quickly becomes familiar the arts of subterfuge and how to observe and follow the unsuspecting. He did not take a single step without his band of heavily armed mercenaries. Even during the night they surrounded his residence. Should the murderer appear — and he would, considering how reckless he behaved hitherto — his drive for revenge had to be truly strong. It was a cold and misty night. The hired guards were playing cards and drinking glogg to stay warm. Behind a large, double-sided window upstairs, Evan

had finished donning his nightdress and joined his lover — a whore who appeared to favor rich customers. It was all just like any other evening — except for a certain black shadow darting over the roofs. I noticed it, of course. He seemed to scout the area. Murder lay in the sweet smell of crackling wood coming from the merchant's mansion. The sweet smell of death.

He danced in the shadows of the night, avoiding the moonlight. I myself could hardly follow him; and that was extraordinary. My eyes were excellently trained for such things. The mercenaries guarding the main entrance were naught but a lukewarm appetizer to him. Their throats were gaping open and their life's blood already running down in streams before they could so much as utter a word. I had to be careful. One false step and I would end like those pitiful men. With a swift series of movements, the assassin pulled himself up to the first floor. When he disappeared in the dark, I rushed forward, opening the lock with a spell — there was no time for honest thieves' work.

Inside, it was deathly quiet. Hopefully I wasn't too late. While I sneaked ahead, I suddenly sensed a draft. The back door was standing open. But why…? I was not given the chance to end that line of thought. Out of the dark, a huge creature was approaching me. I could make out nothing more than two glowing yellow points — pupils. I threw myself to the side and narrowly escaped it. It was rattling and slurping and trailed a mercenary's corpse on the deal boards. That couldn't have been a human. But then, what else? A shrill shriek, followed by hollow rattling took me out of my shock-induced paralysis. I struggled to my feet and stormed upstairs. The door to the bed-chamber was open, with several mercenaries lying before her. All of them gruesomely disfigured. The corridors end seemed to almost swim in blood. Rushing through the door, I was left breathless: a huge creature, surely larger than two grown men, had grabbed Dal'Volar at his feet. He was hanging headlong and floundered with his feet. Abominable, hideous, deformed, with ailing blue to violet skin, red purulent blisters, warts and tumors from which bones and distorted joints were growing, the creature breathed in his face. It distantly resembled a human. I had seen such a thing only once before. Only a mutation, only the blue death could bring forth such a monstrosity. The assassin, hidden under black garments and standing next to such a creature, seemed almost thin and malnourished, though he was small even without comparing the two. The merchant's whore was still lying on the bed, now with red streams meandering through the sheets.

“Please, I'll give you any gold you ask of me. Just let me live, please. ”, Dal'Volar shrieked, still vainly attempting to free himself.

The creature gripped him harder. The merchant howled in pain, and a loud crack was audible. His leg had to be broken.

“Do you remember my face, Mysir Dal'Volar? ”, the assassin asked.

He took off his hood and a young, good-looking, blond man appeared. The candle's light betrayed a long scar over his right eye. Evan choked.

“No; and why would I?! Whoever you are, let me go, I beg you. ”, he panted.

“A shame”, the assassin said with a voice cold as ice. “I was still very small when you took everything I had. My father's name was Jorlinn … Jorlinn Drosselstein. Ever heard of him? — You probably forgot him as well, though you once called him “friend”. Back then, you expelled my father from the Golden Sickle and ruined his business. Why, you are asking? Because he was a better merchant than you. He surpassed you. He might even have taken over your office as head of the Sickle. But then, you treat everyone in your way to success like that. Together with your group of corrupt followers, you exterminate them all. But this time you cut of your nose to spite your face. My father took his life after you ruined him. My mother shortly after. You made me an urchin, my dear Master Dal'Volar. The friends who helped you back then have already paid their due. Now it is your turn. For once, your debt cannot be offset by gold. The only acceptable price for it…”

The assassin put his dagger to the merchant's throat. ”… is your death. ”

With a wild hateful stroak, his blade opened Dal'Volar's throat. Blood splattered on his cheeks. The joy at beholding the merchant's death was written on the assassins face. He wiped the blade on his cloak.

“Well done, Silvi”, he said to the creature. She gave no answer. “Now we can finally begin the next phase of our plan. I heard of a certain captain in the city guard, supposedly entangled in our story…” He went silent.

I was still standing in the doorway, silently observing everything. At first, he drew his dagger and was about to attack me. Then, however, he let his weapon sink and neither did he attempt to flee. I made a step forward.

“You resurrected someone, am I right?”, I asked and nodded towards his creature. “I can sense the dark magic you used. It is right here in this room and I found traces of it next to your victims. Its smell surrounds their lifeless bodies, it follows you wherever you go — because you are connected to this creature. ”

The assassin regarded me, lurking, calculating.

“Judging from the strength of the connection between you and this mutated mage, you must have been very close. Good friends? Lovers…?”

“Brother and sister.”, he interrupted with a sullen stare.

There was a tense silence.

“Who are you? Are you looking to get the bounty? ”, he asked.

“I am an interested observer. As for the judiciary — I don't have anything to do with them, and neither do I usually involve myself in such affairs. ” I regarded the creature from a safe distance.

“Why should I trust you?”

“Why should I watch you commit a murder if I were your foe? Considering what is known about you, I would be naïve to attempt an arrest.”, I said.

It was silent once more. I went to a table with two chairs where I sat and filled two cups with the merchant's wine. Though I am not proud of it, I have to admit that I didn't feel certain in that moment. I noticed hints of fear inside me and had to kill these emotions immediately. The man before me was unpredictable.

“Sit. I should like to speak with you. I don't think we need to worry about time. You killed all the guards without waking so much as a single soul.”

The assassin looked at me, taken aback. It would seem I had woken his interest with my fearless gesture since, believe it or not, thus it was that I ended up at a table with a cold-blooded serial killer and his mutated, deadly beast. We had a longer conversation on his way of killing and other things.

“So that's the secret of this Oorbâya. You control what it — excuse me — what she does. Her true spirit is captured inside of her and she does not realize what happens around her. Neither does she have any control over her body. I have never heard from such an incident during a resurrection or soul absorption. How did it happen?”

“She never coped with our Parent's death. In her striving for arcane power and revenge, she overdid it. At first it was the fever, then the madness came. I had to kill her before she would kill me. My resurrection spell binds her to the form she had assumed during her mutation. But in this state, she can't even speak. I am searching for the power able to help me transform her to her old self or at least give her the ability to feel again. ” The assassin spoke so utterly without emotion he made me feel uneasy just by listening. The creature called Silvi grunted as if she were half asleep. With empty eyes, she stared at the wall.

“You are very young, almost a child still. Yet you kill with a determination and audacity probably no one else in your age possesses. I am sorry for your sister, but I do not need to tell you that. You have long disavowed all feelings. I see the iron mantle around your heart.”

“I live only for revenge. And for Silvi. People like you cannot understand it.”

“You err. I do understand it. Fine. Though you and I may not have much in common, one thing still unites us: Without our task, our existence would be meaningless. It would not be worth more than that of a pebble stone on the roadside. Inevitably, our death would be the only logical result.”

“Be careful with whom you compare yourself, Wanderer. In my case, comparisons bring you closer to the darkness than you might like. ”

“I can no longer fear the darkness you are talking about. I know it well enough, believe me.”

“Then you never encountered the true darkness. Believe me. ”

“I did. It sits before me, in human shape.”, I said.

We drank silently. It took some time before the assassin rose to speak again.

“Jasper.”

I looked at him, asking.

“In case you have to use a name in your notes. That makes the story more personal, don't you think? Posterity should not remember me as a nameless murderer. Call me Jasper. Somehow I always liked that name. ”

I laughed and looked out of the window. Morning came at last. The assassin drank up and rose.

“Night will be over soon. This place will be alive with soldiers, come dawn. You should leave before they hang you for my crimes. ”

I nodded.

“I have a better name for you than Jasper.”, I said, as he crossed the doorstep. Silvi stomped ahead clumsily and was unrecognizable already. He moved his head aside and I could easily see the scar on his face.

“The shadow dancer.”

He grinned mischievous. But in truth it was the grin of a small boy who lost his whole family.

“Poetic, in a way. But I could get used to it.”

Then he disappeared; and no living soul ever saw him again.

Tales of the Wanderer: The Well-traveled One

I cannot claim that I attended many parties in my life. I also never loved like normal people. And concerning women, well I … don't know what it means to share a bed with them. Soft, mellow kisses or tenderness are not part of my destiny. The harsh wind of the tides which slowly carries me off, the surging waves of the salty sea, on mountains and in the shadow of old trees, underneath a sparkling starry sky, that is where I feel at home. I visited many places, saw much evil. These are my priceless memories which will stay with me until death. A lone wanderer, eternally cursed to stride ahead towards a brightly shining sun at the horizon. At this mild evening near the end of summer none of that mattered. Every so often I wished that the time could stand still, the world stay as it is with me still sitting on the wooden bench in mid of the decorated village square, having the seducing whispers of that girl in my ear.

The festivities were in full swing since early noon and were still going strong in the evening. The party put the whole village in an exceptional state. The tall oaks and poplars shine in the light of red, green, blue and yellow lampoons which were hung at ropes between houses and trees. The villagers danced, ate and drank exuberantly — in fine it was a party straight from the book. The reason for the festivities was not only the bountiful harvest but also the marriage of the village chief's daughter, with a young, sturdy and good-looking boy from the neighboring village to boot. Singing and the sounds of lutes, flutes and of whatever other instruments could be found resounded in the alleys. The elderly told their fable stories to the children, and several artists performed the whole day long on a stage, starting with jongleurs, to animal tamers, … ah, I could tell you about the splendid atmosphere the whole day, I enjoyed it to the fullest even though one could hardly tell as such when looking at me. In the middle of all this hustle and bustle I cautiously sipped on my mug filled with beer. Despite my inner joy, I wasn't here by chance. There was something to do for me in this village. I had to meet somebody. As I was watching the villagers dancing, a finger tenderly tapped on my shoulder. I turned around and found myself looking in the face of a young woman. Her hair flew down her shoulders as walnut brown little curls and framed her pink-colored face with cheeks reddened by the alcohol. Her glance was light and sweet but there was something more to it, some sort of immeasurable depth. Still waters run deep, as the popular saying goes … but enough of that. "Mysir, may I ask you for this dance? You look so gloomy, such is simply not allowed at such a nice and festive day", she said. I smirked. "Am I not a bit too old for you?" I still was in my prime, but anyone would have seen that the girl was very young and that she could have decided on every other young man out there instead of me. "Luckily that is not yours to decide". She held her hand out to me. I shortly struggled with myself, but I eventually yielded to my desire. She led me to the place where the dancing people gathered. I never was a good dancer, that is something you should know, but after a short while she had ensnared me

so much that I even whirled her around and performed dance steps which I never even dreamt of. I enjoyed it. It does not happen often that I can forget everything around me, all the torrent and the whispers of the earth. At that day, her beautiful face in front of me, I was allowed to do just that.

We sat down on a bench, talked about this and that, about the things common people usually talk. I could not resist telling her that she was to my fancy. If my appointment would have allowed me to, I would have probably spend a few days with her. Perhaps we would have become a cute couple, with children and calm evenings filled with clittering crickets and coziness. While thinking about that my heart sinks, but I always knew about the sacrifices I had to make. It slowly got darker — the night fell — and the artists left the stage one by one. The village chief, obviously drunk, teetered onto the podium located at the head of the celebrating people. He put his mug down and clapped his hands. Silence spread in the village square. Meanwhile a joke of mine made the girl laugh so much that she nearly fell off the bench. “My name is Lari. You still haven't told me yours, stranger. ”, she said and got so close to me that I could clearly perceive her odor. She bathed a short while ago, maybe even just today before the party started and smelled unbelievably nice. The moment I wanted to answer the village chief with a loud voice announced: “Come on guys, until now everything was well and good but now the real show begins. For the highlight of the evening I have an extraordinary surprise for all of you, since for my daughter and her groom no price is too high. He came to us from far lands, and after he already greatly astonished the neighboring villages with his skills he finally arrived at this place. Let us welcome the legendary and crazy fire-breather. Welcome Dragobar, the famous Flame of Nehrim!”

I pricked up my ears. A tense silence filled the air. I owed my name to Lari, although I couldn't have told her a name anyways. I didn't have one … would have been a nobody, in her eyes. A scrawny fellow entered the stage and bowed to the audience. He wore long baggy trousers which he had put into his boots. Some burn scars could be seen on his naked upper body. Sideways he was missing some hairs, probably also victim of a scorch, the rest protruded from his head like a gray white thicket. He bowed, drank a specific liquid and picked up his torch. I curiously watched what happened next: From the torch a gush of fire shot in the air. With his other hand he opened a phial and pivoted it in front of the fire. The flames followed his motion and created a long, swirling and shimmering snake. He let the “snake” whirr above the stage so that it did several tricks while he himself acrobatically danced over the wooden planks to finish all the complicated figures. His performance took the breath of the whole audience — the snake only had been the beginning of his show. It was followed by artistic interludes with bow and arrow and with several other home-made constructions which he combined with his flame arts. In any case Dragobar lived up to his name. Eventually — the artist was busy with entwining two fire spirals — I noticed some movement in the rear rows of the spectators. People were roughly brushed aside. Three guards pushed their way through to the stage. I anticipated that — now things would get even more interesting. The guards, who were clearly men of Chancellor Barateon who had recently taken control of Nehrim's Middlerealm walked on the stage while the village elder wildly protested. One of them took the torch from the fire-breather, threw it to the ground and noisily

stamped it out. Lari moved closer to me while being frightened. “Are you the man called the “Flame of Nehrim”?”, one of the soldiers grumbled who was apparently the commander of the small troop. “Who wants to know that?”, Dragobar asked. “Don't get cocky. You are using forbidden arts, magic, right? — don't deny it, we saw enough of your frippery. Chancellor Barateon doesn't tolerate your kind anymore. We were ordered to take you with us.”

“And to where do the sirs intend to bring me?”, asked Dragobar politely. “To the dark cell in which you belong”, was the answer. Dragobar sighed. “Alright. Let me collect my belongings, then I'll come with you.” I frowned. That was too easy. He would never surrender so fast. The fire-breather went to the backside of the stage and rummaged around in his stuff. “I never liked Barateon one bit, even before he came to power. I always thought that his breath smelled awful, and that you could smell it throughout the whole town whenever he held a speech.”, he said with his back to the soldiers. Weapons clanked at that. Suddenly Dragobar turned around and threw a metallic something between the three soldiers — something with eight mechanical legs. ” Ahh, what's this?!” There was a loud noise and the thing exploded. A greenish smoke screen engulfed the soldiers and they started coughing and staggered around aimlessly. The village square descended into turmoil. I broke away from the baffled Lari without any sort of goodbye and shouldered my way through the crowd. Now my merry “life” was over, I had to leave, I had to leave my dream bubble which I had created for a short time and went back to my mission.

I saw Dragobar only after I had left the crowd. He left the village at a smart pace. I quietly followed him for a while through the dark night and small forests. You stopped in one of those — with their roots two big trees overgrew the entrance to an old burial chamber, bathed in moonlight and placed in the fangs of a slope. The iron gate, which should bar said entrance, was bent so much that one could easily get through it. If I kept on following him there was the danger of scaring him away, so I placed everything on one card. “So this is where you are hiding.” He flinched, just like a timid animal, shortly before he disappeared into the tomb. I slit down the slope so that I could see him clearly. “A good hiding place. The soldiers surely won't search for you here.” “If nobody tells them about it, then yes.” There certainly was a bit of a threat mixed into his tone. He turned around and faced me. “You have nothing to fear from me”, I declared. Silence descended upon this place. The cry of a Tawny Owl resounded in the forest, cutting the silence in half like a sharp sword.

“There are stories about a wanderer in this area. Those are about you.” ” From where…?” “I can tell by your smell. You do not smell like this part of the world — it is more like a combination of many different smells from all over the world.”, he interrupted my question. “It seems that you have quite the fine nose.” He went closer to me and sniffed. “No, just an exceptionally trained one. I interact quite often with animals, like squirrels. Smart fellows. They taught me how to truly use one's nose.” “I see”, I responded while being mildly irritated. It was known that Dragobar was a bit of a lunatic. But it is also said that he was not always like that in the past, before the madness caught him. Nevertheless he still was very intelligent as his inventories for the stage and his thought over way of moving showed.

His every move was thoughtful. “Then perhaps you also know why I am here.” “Of course. It is not like I am stupid. You want to write a story about me, just like your sort tends to do. You are not the first person of that craft that I meet. Not a common wanderer, a collector. But why are you collecting them, the warrior skills I mean. For a war? Are you building an army in secret, molding it according to your beliefs? Or is there a much bigger mystery behind all of this?” He fell silent. “I will tell you my story only after you answered my questions.” I returned his mad look unyieldingly and resolutely with a glance, steadier than an old stone. ” I cannot answer them. If you really know my “craft”, you should know that.” “Well, then you may leave again right now. I won't tell you anything about me, no matter what you may have heard about me before.” He tried to disappear into the darkness of the burial chamber. “There are many stories about you. That Dragobar, the Flame of Nehrim is said to have learnt fire-breathing from dragons themselves. That he himself is a dragon with a human appearance. And…” I shortly paused to deepen the impact of the following words. “That he is said to be the only survivor of the Sunfire.” Dragobar's face froze to ice in the moonlight which broke through the trees. As if a long-forgotten memory slowly creeped back into his mind. “I investigated you for a long time before I could finally track you here. That wasn't easy, you managed to hide yourself darned well.”

Dragobar stayed silent. “I know many things about you — who would I be if I let a genius like you slip through my fingers without mentioning them in my chronicles. You were present when Dal'Marak researched the Sunwheel and destroyed Thalgard with his greed. No, what am I saying, you were not just present but even his assistant, one of the most famous arcane inventors and strategists of your time, or not?” The look of the fire-breather had lost its focus — now it turned back to me. “Torus, the “Arcane One”. Or Torus Tasselsrock, if you prefer your given name to the drivel poets impose on one. Perhaps you also already forgot your real name. After all that happened more than 2000 years and several lives ago. There is just one thing you have to tell me, as that is something I have yet to understand fully: How did you manage to survive for so long?” Dragobar looked ahead aghastly. Suddenly he started laughing. “That's a nice story you created there. You should not take too much of that Glimmerdustcap, mysir. I am a simple fire-breather from Enderal. I am honored that you saw such a famous character in me. At the same time I am sorry that I have to disappoint you.” He bowed, obviously a sign to tell me how unwelcome I was. “Cut it out. Your mask fell off long ago. You know exactly that you cannot trick somebody like me.”, I insisted. His silly kindness was gone quickly. “Let's come straight to the point.” “Does somebody else also know thereof?”, he asked with a cold voice. I sighed. “Are you in earnest? Do you really want to threaten me? That would belie your former splendor.” I could hear how he grinded his teeth. He had to fight with himself which told me that I was on the right way. “I would call that one of the most enthralling discoveries of our era. The way I see it, you have only two choices from your standpoint. You kill me and by doing so bury your secret for all of eternity, or you try to have a conversation with me and hear what I have to say. I advise you to choose the latter with regard to the abilities one as myself has to acquire in my line of work which can make me into the worst nightmare for my enemies if I have to use them, as you should know.”, I said.

The fire-breather remained silent. He most likely weighed his options. Then he took a step towards me. I twitched barely noticeably. He walked past me, towards a rock and sat down. For a short moment I thought that he would attack me. "What is it that you want to know?" "Tell me what happened back then." "If I could … The last thing I can remember is an ear-pircing and enormous explosion, which took both my hearing and sight. Beforehand Dal'Marak and I tried to decipher the artifact. We failed which should be common knowledge. When I awoke after the explosion I was in an entirely different place, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of Qyra's desert. I was lucky that a caravan took me in. Like that, all took its course …" He started to tell me about what happened from then on, about his travels over the continents, about his search for a new meaning in life. About how he let Torus die and took the name Dragobar and many more. In a way, his current self resembled mine. He wandered all the time, home- and nameless. He became a nobody.

"You changed after the explosion, didn't you? Something had changed." He nodded. "I lost all of my magical abilities. I cannot even lit a small fire anymore … how disgraceful for a former master. At the same time I gained eternal life. Age cannot kill me anymore. As long as nobody pierces me with a spear I will live until Vyn turns to ashes." "Immortality, an eternal life. I thought that was only possible for the Lost Ones in a much more macabre way." "Then you were wrong. Though it is not like I can live the dream that most have. The longer I live, the more insane I get. Madness takes over my mind slowly and I live for the day. Fighting it doesn't help, I cannot prevent it." "Why did you work as fire-breather, and why on Nehrim?" "Fire-breathing was a nice hobby for me next to all the battles, even in the past. This identity as Dragobar gave me support when I had none. And why Nehrim? — Well until this Chancellor came into power it was a nice place to live. I wandered from North to South through the settlements on the way, always had something to eat and a roof above my head. Most of the people here highly esteem true talent." He made a sweeping gesture with his hands. After a longer period of silence I collected myself for the coming, and also most important, part of our conversation. I thought that it was finally time to get to that point. "I am not just here to write about you. Every so often my mission also involves the task to help souls, which do not belong into this world anymore, to find their path. The magical power of the artifact had a different effect on you than on your companions and your master. It spared you, for whatever reason, and brought you to another place. Perhaps the reason was that you still had a mission to accomplish in your life. It granted you supernatural powers and left much of you in the here and now. But this magical trace also was the reason why I found you. You do not belong here anymore, Torus. I can see into your innermost self. Your time is long up. The mission which bound you to life was already accomplished."

He dropped his gaze. "Do you want to kill me?" "No. Killing contradicts my creed. I can do something else for you. But it will only work if you made peace with yourself and you are ready to go. After such a long time it is always hard to say goodbye." "Tell me, what is it?" I reached into my bag and pulled out a flat stone, roughly as big as a fingertip. I shimmered weakly in the light of the night and mirrored the colors of the rainbow. "This is a shifter." I put it down on a tree stump. "Swallow it and you will

be able to leave this world without any pain." "Won't you force me to swallow it?", Torus asked in wonder. "Judging over life and death is not my task. I want to help you. If there ever is a time in which the ordeal of being immortal becomes too much for you to handle, take it. It will set you free." I pulled my cape closer and turned around. The foliage of the last autumn which covered the floor rustled under my boots. "Thank you, Wanderer." I nodded while looking in the opposite direction and left the little wood.

Whether he still lives or made use of my help, I cannot say. Dragobar, Torus, the Arcane One, the Flame of Nehrim — that man had many names, many of which we do not even know. I want to add one to those: Torus Tasselsrock — the "Well-traveled One".

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 1: Follow the fire

Premise

They call me "The Butcher".

It hurts to write these words, though I am aware of their truth. What else should a man be called whose trail is marked by dozens of corpses, corpses which are not mute witnesses of a battle or an accident, no, corpses which are solely the result of my own doing. Men, women, elders, children. Priests, merchants, travelers and whores. My murders seem to follow an inscrutable pattern whose arbitrariness will put an icy veil around everyone's heart. But of course this will not be what heralds will proclaim. For them and the Holy Order I will be no less than a monstrosity, a pathless demon, who has been led astray by his own mundane cravings. They will call me an evil man, a beast with a heart black as midnight. Because these are the colors in which the world prefers to think: black and white. No one will ask about the how and why. Even these pages will be hard to acquire, for the Holy Order will surely do everything in its power to prohibit their printing — which is why I shall congratulate you, whoever you may be, for holding them in your very own hands. With this assembly of withered pages you shall be given an insight into my very own thoughts.

Do not understand them as a justification for my deeds, because this is not what they are. I assume full responsibility for what I have done and I desire no absolution, neither from Malphas — whose supposed "divinity" is something I nowadays merely smile upon —, nor from the people, from justice or some other strange, greater power whose true nature we have not yet learned to comprehend.

This book is no more than a testimony of strange and inscrutable happenings yonder, which have made me into what I am.

Chapter 1

Follow the fire

It was a dull, cold and wet morning that should change my life forever. Yes… Somehow it almost seemed as if that day Mother Nature, as a response for the festivities of the preceding night, had decided to recover herself with a dreamy, nondescript day. The reason for the aforementioned festivities had been the so-called Star Summer Night, which every year marks the beginning of a new spring and in which the night sky is illuminated by dozens of wild, untamed starfires. While the common people, however, use the occasion to indulge in their mundane cravings — whether by drinking in smoky taverns, dancing around the first delve of spade, or having cultivated conversations

on a masked ball —, for us clerics it means no less than a night filled with processions, sermons and prayer. After shortly attending the joyous speech of the mayor and giving my priestly blessing to the commencement of the festivities, I silently retreated into the temple and prayed until both my knees and my tongue were sore, just like the Holy Verses oblige every priest to do. It was of no significance whether the cleric was the High Priest in person or — as it was the case with me — merely a simple, insignificant Father in an even simpler and more insignificant village.

Mine was called Fogville and was situated on a constantly windy, sparsely vegetated cliff at the very west of Enderal. It owed its name to — who would have guessed that? — the pale, thin wafts of mist which every morning laid themselves over the village's countenance like a mourning veil over the face of an old widow.

I still remember this last gaze yonder, which I threw upon the poor houses at the bottom of the hill the village's temple was enthroned upon. After the dissonant orchestration of lute music, animated laughter and popping of corks, an almost eerie silence had laid itself upon the village. Only here and there a lonesome figure could be seen and heard moving through the cool mist, and even the bakery's chimney remained still. I feebly smiled into the face of the village I had grown up in. My father, who actually wasn't my father, claimed to have found me wrapped in linen and lying in a basket near a wayshrine on the Mist Road. I had been abandoned, and the man who later became my father took me to the village, "full of devotion and grateful for the divine gift". However, before his untimely death, only ten years later, I never got rid of the feeling that his compassionate act was due to the fact that he found me right underneath a statue of Malphas, and not because of his wish for a child.

Gilmon the Tanner, as the villagers called him, was a delicate man with pockmarked skin and a slim nose. In his own opinion, the whole world conspired against him, which was the sole reason for his misery. We never talked much, but when we did, our conversations followed a general pattern. With his sawing voice, he called me to his fireplace room, where he rigidly sat most of the time, along with two empty tankards of beer. Then he indicated me to sit down and announced that he had "to get something off his chest." The fact that only his foundling son was there to listen was another proof for how badly life had treated him. It started right when I sat down. Tjalmar the Hunter had sold him rancid oils. An evil cutthroat, my father called him, but after all, it was in the nature of the Aeterna, he said, and in Enderal this fact was not as well known as in Nehrim. Or Matressa Zulja, who had served him bitter wine. A mean crone she was, he said, oh yes, but thanks to Malphas he had perceived her plan and cut her down to size. And then, of course, Rashik the Smith's twin boys. Rascals they were, both of them. No respect they had for path-abiding, hard-working people like him. But no manners were to be expected from a coal man and his breed. "What do they know about decency?", he said, excitedly. "These folks do nothing but shag until the bed breaks down." It did not matter to him that Rashik was a Qyran living in third generation in Enderal, and that he preferred a long-term union with his mate over the promiscuous family clans of his homeland.

These conversations, his persistently sour breath, and the smell of raw hides, leather and animal fats in the workshop made up a great deal of my childhood. Friends I had only a few to none, mostly due to the fact that my father made me work hard in the tannery as soon as I reached the age of five. If Mater Pyléa — I am sure of this now — had not by incident noticed my quick wit, I would still be there today, working between animal parts, stretched hides and slippery grease. Maybe the strange experience at that misty morning would have never happened. Yet she noticed, and that is how it came that on the day of my path consecration the aged priest proclaimed my holy path in a solemn voice. I, Jaél, Tanner's son, was predestined to entirely dedicate my life to Malphas' glory — as a priest. Of course, back then I did not fully comprehend what that meant, but the other children's awestruck reactions made me realize it was a good thing.

Thus I left the bleak tannery and only entered the old house at the end of the village to sleep there. For my foster-father, the "child abduction" was only one more act of treason. Looking back, I think that the amiable Mater was the only real caregiver in my life. She taught me to read and write, and she taught me the essentials of herbal lore. With empathy and toughness she taught me what I needed to know to become part of the Endralean clergy. Ten winters later, I received priesthood and began to serve in the small temple. I did what an obedient priest had to do: I held services, I prayed, I maintained the temple and I heard the villager's confessions. Mater Pyléa left the village on her sixtieth namesday and moved to a retirement quarter in the Sun Temple of the capital, which I only knew from tales. A year later my father passed away, an event that, to my surprise, affected me deeply. Then, everything became lethargic routine, until that very day.

The man that I was then — was he a happy man? I am not able to tell. When I try to recall the first twenty-eight years of my life, my memories seem to be like fading words on an old parchment. My reason tells me that I was blessed, in a way. The life of a priest was pleasant and constant, without highs and lows. I had enough to eat, I had a home and enough pennies to afford the services of a wandering whore from time to time. I knew that, according to the Holy Verses, at the end of my days I would enter the Eternal Paths, my Path trodden, my task fulfilled. But things turned out differently.

After I had taken off my robes and wearily laid down under the sheet of sheep's wool, I noticed a strange and dull feeling in my stomach. Today I know that this unremarkable moment was the first time I encountered the fire. It was small, insignificant, only a weak glow, but it was there, knowing that I would wake up as a different man. However, on this gray morning I was too tired to pay attention to it. Exhausted, I wrapped my sheet around myself and was fast asleep a moment later.

I awoke in a dream.

I found myself on an idyllic forest glade, surrounded by green oak trees, whose leaves were moved gently by the wind. The setting sun stood at the horizon like molten blaze and threw a red light over the scenery. I savored the spicy, fresh air, which tasted of wet moss, morning dew and old secrets, mysterious, wild and clear, like life itself. In contrast to what we all know from the nightly journeys

that we call dreams, I was fully aware of the unreality of the scenery. So I accepted it as if it was as natural as time's passing. I was stark naked, as on the day of my birth, but I was not ashamed. On the contrary: I felt strong, clear and free.

When I took my eyes away from the sky and looked in front of me, I saw her. She stood in an old ruin that was overgrown with ivy and whose collapsed walls and arches told of ancient times. She wore a gray, flowing robe that only allowed a glimpse of her femininity beneath. Her hood hung deeply over her face so that only the tender and delicate parts of her cheeks and chin were visible — a sight that could have come from the imagination of a Qyranian painter. Her dense, midnight black hair was tied into snake-like braids and fell down to her shoulders. Various things were interwoven in her hair: old, faded coins that must have been minted by lost civilizations; small, finely polished bones from animals unknown to us; and strange ribbons whose colorful threads created an artful pattern. But it was not all this that hypnotized me and drew me towards the veiled figure in the ruin. It was her smile. With every step I took towards her, I fell deeper into its charm. It was not a lovely smile, as some might assume. It was a mixture of melancholy, rage, hope and love, a symphony of contradicting feelings which I thought to be irreconcilable. It was a smile that was able to speak great wisdom as much as orders that would mean the death of thousands. A smile born from truths recognized in otherworldly existences. Cold sweat ran from my pores, and I felt how apprehensiveness mixed with the peaceful bliss of the moment just gone.

I came to a halt a few steps before her, still staring at her magical smile like a starving man at a feast. For a moment I believed to recognize a glimpse of mirth in her features. But it faded away as fast as it had appeared. Then she began to speak. “You are dying, Jaél.” Her voice was rough and tender at the same time, full of contrast. She spoke without mockery, pity or cruelty.

“Why?”, I heard myself responding mechanically. “I am in the best of health.” My answer was as pathetic and clumsy as it must appear to the reader of these yellowed pages, but I spoke them faster than I was able to think, without control. The woman nodded subtly, as if she had expected this very response.

“You affirm that you are of good health”, she paraphrased my words with a peculiar intonation. “But you fail to perceive the fabric of this world in all its intricacy.” Slowly and regretfully, she shook her head, like a Magistra in the monastery school who got a foolish answer from a novice to a very simple question. Then she took her hands out of the robe's sleeves and indicated me to follow her. Even her walk had something of another world about it. Her body did not move with her steps, but seemed to float. Silent and obedient, I followed her through the old ruin. Today, after I had gone through the vision in my thoughts many thousand times, I know that it was an old trading post. The walls and the rusty gate left no doubt about it. — But in the vision, I did not care about such banalities. To follow the figure in front of me was my sole purpose. She stopped in front of an old, overgrown tower,

presumably once the heart of the ruin, and opened the cast-iron door, which swung aside in an eerie, silent manner.

"Go, Jaél", she said. "Go and perceive the truth." These were the last words I heard until the horrid discovery inside the ruin. For when I was about to reply, she was gone. For the first time, a feeling of uncertainty mingled with the confidence that I had at the beginning of the vision. I was still aware of the fact that my physical body was lying on a bed in a modest chamber, in another world. Also I knew that I could decide to wake from the wonderful and terrible vision. But I did not. Why? — I am unable to say. Was it out of curiosity? Was it the sense of fate that covered the ruin like a thin, transcendent sleeve? I don't know.

I entered. The floor felt cold under my naked feet, and the dusty air that was only lit by a pale red sunbeam made me cough as it filled my lungs. The inside was almost empty, except for spiderwebs, weathered furniture and broken stones that had fallen from the crumbling walls. In the middle there was a wooden construction, an extraordinarily large, upright box. Hesitantly, I walked closer. A word came to my head, but faded from my mind as fast as it had appeared. I recognized how the fire of the setting sun extinguished and how it was replaced by a dull blue. Gentle, hazy fog started to cover the scenery, and everything that was peaceful and blessed before I entered the ruin was replaced by a sense of trepidation. Creeping, cold, wasting.

My hand moved along the surface of the strange box that was slightly taller than me. The wood was decayed and gray, and an odd smell came from it, like iron. It was sweet and tempting, but at the same time repellant. *Leave!*, flashed through my head. *Leave before you inflame it.* I was unable to determine if it was I who thought these thoughts. But of course, I did not leave. Slowly my hand moved toward a gap at the side the of the box that allowed me to open its lid. As the hinge opened with a reluctant, mourning sound, I remembered the word that had slipped my mind. This time it did not vanish, it preserved in all its dreadfulness. The wooden construction in the middle of this abandoned ruin was no box. It was a coffin.

Even today I can hardly find the right words for the terror that stared at me from the decomposing inside of the coffin. Without any doubt, the creature before my very eyes was myself. There it was, the brown hair, thinning, even at the age of twenty-eight. There it was, the well-trimmed, dense beard that grew down to my chest, the beard that I grew to hide my unremarkable, longish face. And there it was, the crooked nose, giving my face a vulture-like appearance, making me avoid my own reflection in the mirror. But the body in the coffin was dead, clenched like in the moment of dying. Penned in like cattle, his head was pressed down to his shoulders by the small dimensions of the coffin, his unnatural posture a silent accusation. His body was pinched, his arms pressed to himself in a twisted manner. Much more gruesome, though, was the face. The skin was pale and had a greenish gray color like decayed tombstones. There were many deep fissures that were not bleeding, but displaying bare flesh and white bones. The beard was curly and wild, and maggots moved around in the tangled mesh,

oozing a festering, doughy liquid that was dripping down to the stone floor. The man's cheeks were hollow, and his lacerated lips were opened in a twisted way that gave the impression of a tormented smile. His teeth were rotten and his tongue gray. But none of this was the reason for the bloodcurdling, panic-fuelled cry that escaped my throat. It was the eyes. Or, rather, it was the place where the eyes used to be on a healthy, living person.

But there were no eyes. Weak and pale like shrouds, the lids, devoid of any sense, hung over gaping black sockets. Contradicting any logic, they seemed to stare at me, whispering, rotting, and dead. The same festering liquid that came from the man's beard trickled down the brows and disappeared in the empty eye sockets. No… No words can describe the terror that filled me when I looked at that deformed creature.

In panic, I hit the withered copy of myself, but I only loosened the body so it fell right toward me. I felt how the repellent, festering corpse water from the beard touched my lips, while a handful of maggots landed on my shoulder. For a short moment I was petrified. I held myself in my arms, like a twin his own deceased brother. But this was no twin. When the maggots tried to move up my neck, I pushed the corpse away with a shrill cry, wiped away the maggots and fled out of the ruin.

Meanwhile, it was night, and the full moon stood cold, white and unmoving at the sky. The veil of mist that formed inside the ruin faded as soon as I came outside and let myself fall to the ground, crying and breathing heavily. *I am dead,* flashed through my mind, again and again. *DEAD!* I uttered a panicky scream, a pitiful effort to banish the madness from my mind. The terror remained, it was omnipresent, and I felt bitter tears making their way through my eyes. *What, by the righteous path, does it mean? What kind of nightmare am I trapped in?* Some might ask why I did not end the vision with the well-known physical stimulus, by pinching myself, even more so because I was fully aware of the unreality of what was happening. The answer is, I was unable to do it, and I knew it. What I went through was not one of the usual, nightly phantasms that occasionally haunt us in the quiet hours. Something that I later began to understand at least a little wanted to show me something, and I was unable to escape the truth, as little as man can escape the sands of time. As I turned my gaze from the floor and started to crouch toward the stone arch and the forest, weeping helplessly, I saw her again. The veiled woman. She stood above me and stared down at me, almost with sympathy. At least I assumed so, because despite the angle of my view, I was unable to recognize anything above her cheeks but the unnatural shadow of her hood.

"What are you?", I brought forth in a weak voice. "What by the Black Guardian's name are you? A demon? An angel of death?" It sounded pathetic, like the lament of a desperate child.

"You ask me what I am", she answered again, an echo of my pitiful words. "And you assume I am a black angel of your god, come upon you to punish you. But" — a touch of maternal tenderness accompanied her rough voice — "you ask the wrong question, Jaél. For who I am is not of importance."

For a moment I stared at her in confusion, unable to react to her enigmatic answer. I remained at the floor for a while, motionless, breathing frantically and panicky, looking at the veiled woman. After what felt like an eternity, I asked the question that needed to be asked.

"And what… what is the right question?"

For a brief moment, I saw what seemed to be a sad smile caress her red lips. "You inquire from me what only you can answer", she said and began to walk towards the stone arch. "And I want to give you an advice." She halted, looking like an unreal shape in the silver of the night. "An advice on how you can avoid the death of your soul." There was a moment of silence. "End your false life. And follow the fire."

Then the vision broke apart.

Up to the present day, the origin and nature of this vision remained a mystery to me. Who was the enigmatic woman? How did she enter my thoughts? Or was it not her, but merely a spectral image of my thoughts, an embodiment of my subconscious? These were the questions that went through my head right after I awoke.

Yet I had not much time to ponder. For when I awoke, breathing heavily and soaked in sweat, I realized that something was different. Disoriented, I rose up and rubbed my burning eyes. I looked around in my room, and my bones cracked reluctantly as I turned my head left and right. *Nothing.* My surroundings seemed perfectly normal. Again, I let my gaze roam the narrow room, from the heavy wooden door, along the small wardrobe, to the scribe's desk in the right corner, on which numerous tomes and scrolls lay in disorder. Insecurely, I closed my eyes and delved into myself. No … The repugnancy was not to be found in my surroundings. It derived from me. To be exact, it derived from a strange feeling in my stomach that was unknown to me back then. It was an uneasiness, dull and stagnant, a diffuse fear similar to the one we fear when we know that terrible or challenging things wait ahead. Notwithstanding, the feeling seemed familiar, like a gloomy truth that was suppressed in my subconscious all the years and that now found its way to my mind, like glowing coal beneath a thin layer of fissured ice that began to melt. Bewildered, I laid my hands on my stomach, in a child-like, instinctive manner. Of course, it did not help — the strange, dull feeling remained.

I rose up dizzily and looked out of the narrow window above the scribe's desk. The vision that had felt like an eternity seemed to have lasted not more than an hour in reality. Still, not a single sound from outside reached my ear, and the light was dim and pale. Only a pallid and grey cone of sunlight brightened the dance of a hundred confused dust grains in the air. In addition to my uneasiness, I was nauseous, my eyes burned and I felt weak. *Water … I need water.* Indolently, I walked to the trough, which was filled with fresh spring water, next to the heavy wooden door. I felt how my uneasiness became stronger, and for a moment an absurd scenario unfolded in my mind. What would I see in the mirror of the water when I bent over the trough? The deformed and decayed grimace I saw in the ruin? Or the unremarkable face of a man that lived his life ruled by coincidence and the lack of alternatives instead of free will? I fought the urge to walk away from the trough and instead went to my knees in front of it. But my fear was baseless. No festering maggots crawled from the face that stared at me in the reflection, no chapped skin revealed the flesh on the bones beneath. *Just a dream. It was just a dream.* I smiled weakly and confused about my own folly, formed my hands to a bowl and drank three deep gulps. Then I sprinkled some water on my face, rubbed it on my body, my hair, my arms and my feet. I took the brush of boar bristles and scrubbed my skin until it began to bite. Finally,

I took my brown priest's robe from the cast-iron hook at the door, slipped it over and leaned wearily against the wall. I felt better but not well. I repeated the sentence several times in my thoughts. Thus, I tried to banish the remains of what I believed to be a nightmare. Yet the desired effect did not occur, for every time I closed my eyes, images of my own corpse flooded through my mind, and my uneasiness grew, as if it wanted to emphasize the meaning of the dream. I sighed and did what I always did when I contemplated — I began to pace around my room.

I remember all too well that this moment was the first time in my life that silence appeared oppressive to me. How I wished to hear the familiar creaking of cartwheels, the bright calls of the baker or the bray of a donkey … But there was nothing, absolutely nothing to hear, not even the mournful singing of the wind that was usually omnipresent in Fogville. Along with the pale light in my chamber I felt like a part of a Tirmatralean mourning tableau. Always the same images: the coffin … the corpse. And the veiled woman and her words … *Follow the fire* … *End your false life.* Was there a connection between these words and the dull feeling in my stomach? Why did I dream of such things at all? What, by the righteous path, did it mean? My countenance clouded. *False life? What a heap of nonsense.* I lived exactly the life that the Path had chosen for me. Even if, from time to time, gloomy thought came to my mind and I felt envious about the adventures who on their journeys had a rest in Fogville, it did not mean that my pious life was in any way "false". No … I was lucky that I did not have to live at the side of my miserable father, smearing grease on animal hides. I was even luckier not to be one of the ill-fated people who cut each other's throats for a stale piece of bread in the Undercity of Ark. I pinched my eyes. *These are the very thoughts that make path-abiding people stray from the Path. They become attracted to an insane vision o an "adventurous life" and get drawn into suffering and misery.* With a gloomy face I thought of terrible stories that from time to time reached Fogville. All the time it had been egoists and power-hungry ones who drew innocent people into ruin along with them. Eventually, I stopped. *No … my life is exactly as it should be.*

"Is that so, Jaél?"

I startled. *What in blazes …?* Irritated, I moved around, trying to find the voice's origin. Nothing … I was alone. But then where did this voice come from? I must have had imagined it. It had come to that — I heard voices! *This dream is driving me insane.* Angry about myself, I started to move again. Yet after only two steps, the voice sounded again in my thoughts — and along with it, the dull feeling in my stomach burned like fresh blaze in the wind. Images and feelings rose in my consciousness, heavy and pressing, but familiar at the same time. This time the voice spoke with a mixture of mourning and mockery.

"How much longer do you want to close your eyes to the truth? What needs to happen to make you finally understand?"

This time I actually tumbled backwards when I heard the voice. Not so much because of the words but because of the feeling it triggered in me. Thoughts flew in my mind, and they were not only

thoughts about the scenes of my dream. I saw myself, lying on my bed, soaked in sweat, shivering. I saw myself, gloomily staring afar while Mater Pyléa was reading out the Path to me. Along with these thoughts came a crawling uneasiness, a feeling of loneliness and fear. Instinctively, I pressed both hands against my stomach. *By the righteous Path … I am losing my mind! Damn it, I am actually losing my mind!* I turned around fast like lightning and hastened to my desk, upon which lay an open, leather-bound folio. It was a handwritten transcription of the Path that I had just started before the festivities of the Star Summer Night. For five decades now it had been possible to reproduce written works in an almost magical manner — thanks to the strange, press-like construction of a cunning Starling researcher (it was called "letterpress" due to the mechanics of the machine). The manual transcription, however, was still considered a sign of spiritual commitment. It had something meditative about it, it was calming, and that was what I needed to banish the rising panic in my stomach. Hastily, I adjusted my chair, opened the inkwell and took the quill. "Work frees the mind", I told myself. I was encouraged by the fact that the barrage of strange images and the feeling that came along with them had decreased. It had been a dream, nothing more. A frightening dream, indeed, but a dream nonetheless. *Yes … Concentrating, writing a few pages, reciting a verse — and the spook will be gone. Nothing will remind me of the disfigured body in the coffin* **of you,** *and tomorrow I will be able to continue my* **meaningless** *life. Indeed, it will be business as usual, and then, one day, I will die in peace,* without having seen the truth at all, an insignificant, pale number among thousands, and no one, no one will ever remember you, Jaél Tanner's son, the Nameless One, and … Only now I realized that sweat was pouring down my forehead and that I was clenching the quill so hard that my hand began to hurt. The sentences that I had written down were scrawly and full of mistakes. I dropped the quill and gasped. *Witchcraft. This is witchcraft!* I slammed the book shut, closed my eyes and started to clear my mind as Mater Pyléa had taught me. *Breathe, Jaél. Breathe.* My entire body trembled, and my pulse hammered in my wrists. Without any doubt, the voice came from within me. It was part of my thoughts, yet still so unfamiliar, threatening and lurking. "It is futile, Jaél", the voice suddenly whispered. "You cannot escape destiny. End your false life, end it here and now … and follow the fire." There was a moment of silence. "Or else you will die."

As the last word faded in my mind, fear exploded inside me. It shot up my spine and made its way through my body, to my heart, to my fingertips, to my skull, right into my brain. The feeling it released was terrible. Again and again the horrid images from my dream appeared along with the strange memories of seemingly random moments of my life. I saw myself pacing between the benches of the temple, without orientation. I saw myself preparing a corpse for its last journey, according to Endraelean tradition, weeping. I saw myself, lying sweating in my bed, breathing heavily and my eyes wide open. However, it were not the images that made the situation so unbearable … It was the feeling that covered everything like a leaden, grey cloud, almost driving me crazy. I felt a mixture of fear and panic, bitter loneliness and desolation. I felt like standing in front of a pitch black abyss, lost and without identity. I felt … alone.

It might be hard for you to comprehend the description, but maybe it helps you understand the mechanism of the human mind. If something terrible happens to someone — such as the death of a loved one —, our mind reacts with a kind of shock. Merely part of what we actually should feel is allowed to enter the immediate mind. The rest will be banished into the depths of our unconsciousness, buried like an unloved, dangerous secret. Only after the mind has somewhat recovered, the banished pieces of memory will be unearthed, piece by piece, so that we can deal with them and finish the mourning process. If, however, for some reason this reworking will not take place, the memories will decay and fester until they are noticed: We feel gloomy, have panic attacks or entirely lose the ability to feel emotions. Though it is possible to live under such conditions until one dies, the buried memories take away a huge part of our vital energy, or, in the worst case, drive us to strange deeds.

As the tentacles of fear were raging in me, I realized that these terrible feelings were exactly such decomposing memories. They had been there forever, lurking shadows beneath a shield of glass. I had noticed them in short moments, small and insignificant. Sometimes in the deepest night, when I awoke from a nightmare, soaked in sweat, unable to grasp only one image of the dream. Sometimes in small fissures of my thought that haunted me while I performed perfectly normal tasks. Then, for a tiny moment, I was filled with a misty and grey loneliness, and I felt as if I was an observer of myself, the spectator of a hypocritical, bigoted play. *My false life.* I lived a lie, a desperate effort of my mind to cover something in me that could not be covered — a secret, something that I had suppressed and that could not be held at bay anymore. Now it had broken free, and it remorselessly showed me what would happen if I did not start to search the truth: Death. *You are dying.*

Yet some among you might know that insights and actions are very opposing things. Even though the voice had forced me to look at it — and I *had* looked at it —, I did not want to accept it. I uttered a guttural cry, wiped my writing utensils from the desk and knocked down my stool. I hit the wall of my chamber with my bare fist, ignoring the burning pain that crawled up my arm. I wanted to banish the feeling inside me, somehow, so that I could get my old life back. But my resistance was in vain, and each second that passed amplified the panic that constricted my throat and drowned me like a remorseless flood. Only when my breath was but a weak gasp, I sank down to the floor with my back against the wall, my face buried in my hands, exhausted. *It is futile.* I felt the salt of my tears burning on my cheeks and began to sob like a child. "What shall I do? By Malphas, what shall I do?" I uttered. My voice sounded shaky and miserable.

For a while, nothing happened. Then I heard the voice again in my thoughts, tender, melancholic.

"You already know the answer, Jaél … She told you what to do."

This time, the voice did not aggravate my loneliness. No, for a moment I almost felt secure, and it was the moment I made my decision. Yes … she was right. I knew what I had to do. I knew it and I had always known it, yet like a fledgling soldier who did not understand that the tales about glorious wars were only tales until he lost his leg I had to see my own death in order to understand.

I had to begin searching for the buried truth. At that moment it was obscure to me what the veiled woman had meant by talking about the "Fire". Was the fire a symbol for the truth? The truth behind the feeling of emptiness and loneliness that I had learned to suppress and that could not be suppressed anymore?

The newborn man who later became known as the "Butcher of Ark" did not yet know that he would soon get the answer to this question.

My memories of the hours right after my decision are only vague. It would be wrong to assume that the oppressive feeling in my stomach vanished after I had gained insight into its nature. No, it was still there, and each time when I had doubts while I was packing my belongings, it grew stronger and more present, like a master who was determined to keep a weak-minded student on the right path by using reprimand and sharp words. Yet I felt a determination that I had never felt in my life before. Indeed I felt a spirit of … optimism, as absurd as it might sound after what had happened to me.

After I had collected all my belongings, I left the temple, which had been my home for more than a decade. One last time I looked back into its awe-inspiring interior. There it stood, Malphas' stone statue, clad in a massive steel harness, determinedly looking ahead. In his left hand the statue held a replica of broken chains, and the right hand pointed forward, showing the way, proudly and full of power. One last time I closed my eyes and smelled the omnipresent mixture of incense, lavender and roses, a scent that used to give me a feeling of comfort. — Now it unpleasantly tickled in my nose and reminded me of the ointment that the inhabitants of the Isles of Kilé used to embalm their dead. I swallowed heavily and closed the door behind me.

The contents of the package that hung on my shoulder was scarce: a loaf of considerably fresh Enderalean bread, a waterskin, my scratchy cotton blanket, a sachet of pennies and the holy 101 verses, which I decided to take along after a moment of hesitation. The book felt heavy, and its leather binding seemed rough and … well, sticky. Nonetheless, my attachment to the lightborn whose holy word was the spiritual compass for any devout Endralean and who was the only companion in my lonesome life so far, except for Mater Pylea, was too deep. One thing was clear to me: Wherever my journey would lead me, I needed food and decent clothing. My priest's robes were too heavy and cumbersome, and they would be too warm in the summer. Also, they seemed like a burden to me, completely inappropriate for the task ahead. Even though every traveler — except for brigands — would treat me with respect, the robes were a symbol for my old life as a priest.

So I had to go to the marketplace and find a trader who would sell his wares despite the holy day. It felt strange to see the place that usually was full of people being so empty and quiet. Only a dog noticed my presence, and a few chickens which by their owner had been perched in a corral surrounded by an

alcove of the weak town wall. Meanwhile, the sun had risen, but the many gray clouds did not allow much light to shine down on the city. It was going to rain.

Eventually, I reached my destination, a small and cozy store. The house walls were overgrown with ivy which framed even the milky windows beneath the crooked roof. A handcart full of barrels and crates stood before the entrance as if it had been abandoned by its owner during work, which was likely considering the smell of alcohol, gunpowder and fried meat in the air. Garlands which would have shined in all colors if enough sunlight had been present hung limply between the houses. Several times I heard a crunch when I walked over some broken jugs. The sign next to the heavy door identified the shop as “Carvai's Sundries”.

I knocked, and I knocked again after a few moments that passed without any reaction. After the third time I heard the sound of scuffling steps, and an aged Starling with clean-shaven face and a sharp nose opened the door. His tired look told me that he had intended to run off the unwanted customer before he recognized me. The dark circles under his eyes made me assume that he had vigorously been celebrating Star Summer Night as well. For a moment the sight seemed bizarre to me, even familiar, as if I had experienced it may times before. However, the feeling was gone at the moment he started to speak. “Well … Father?” he said in a worn out voice. He looked nervously at the embroidered emblem on my robe which showed a stylized eye and a sword. “Can I help you?” I tried to smile. “Indeed you can, by showing me your wares. May I enter?” I was surprised how confident and friendly my voice sounded. For a moment the Starling named Carvai looked at me insecurely. Like all Starlings he was small and wiry, had frizzy hair and a pointy nose. Carvai was a path-abiding man. Every week he and his many children visited the three masses, which was also the reason why I had chosen his store to buy clothes for my ludicrous journey. His respect for the clergy was great, so he would not ask questions. Carvai scratched his nose and gave me a sleepy and confused look. In his eyes I saw the question why by the righteous Path a village priest visited a store that early in the morning. But he nodded devotedly, stepped aside and asked me to enter.

Other than the dire landscape around Fogville, his house had a rustic and cozy feel. The fireplace in the large room at the end of the hall was crackling, and for a moment I saw a young girl peeking through a door at the end of the stairs next to the entrance. I envied the Starling child and her siblings. Their father had given them a home and a feeling of security that I never had with Gilmon. When Pylea had taken me under her wings, it had already been too late.

The wooden walls looked solid yet old, and the large fur of a coast stalker hung at the left side. Reluctantly I took a step forward and almost stumbled over one of the many shoes on the floor. I heard how the door behind me snapped shut and Carvai cleared his throat. “This way, Father”, he said and walked towards the large sales room from which I had heard the crackle of the fire. It was an amazing sight. Behind the wooden counter, which separated the seller's realm from the customer's, numerous items, chests, boxes and pieces of furniture were piled up. Huge bookshelves along the walls

were filled with dusty folios, scrolls, crystals and caskets. The store looked insignificant from outside, but I could not fight the feeling that some precious antiquities could be found here.

"Well … What exactly do you need, Father?" the Starling finally asked. For a moment I could not answer. *What did I actually need?* I wanted to embark on a journey to find the mysterious woman from my dream, and a feeling told me that it might not end in Enderal.

"Well …", I started. "Everything you need for an extended journey."

The Starling furrowed his eyebrows. "A journey? To where?" He faltered for a moment. "If you don't mind the question."

"I am traveling … to Ark", I improvised. The later he would tell anyone about my getaway, the better. "The High Priest asks for us." That seemed to satisfy him.

"I understand …", he said and lifted the hatch in the counter. "I am all the more honored by your visit in my store." I nodded and smiled and let him walk me through his wares.

About half an hour later I was relieved of 102 pennies. I had purchased a sturdy knapsack, a good pair of boots, a hooded traveler's cowl and an old iron dagger, which I did not know how to use. Carvai had also sold me a traveler's staff that he said was favored by pilgrims who visit the seven wayshrines. "It is perfect for repelling insects", he had told me trustworthily. As a farewell, I had blessed him and left with a priestly smile. I got food for my journey in the tavern. The Matris, defying his lack of sleep, was diligently cleaning up the remains of the festivities. He gave me a confused look, but after some explanation about my plans he sold me for a good price a loaf of tasty bread, dried fruit and a tub of pickled whisperweed, which was popular among travelers because of its durability. He also asked for my priestly blessing, which I gave him with a strange feeling. The holy act felt so wrong like never before, and the ceremony seemed not like routine, but like a lie to me.

The guardsman Yleas was the last person I met before I walked down the hill where Fogville was situated. He was too sleepy to ask for my destination. Obediently, he opened the wooden gate and wished me to walk blessed. As I left Fogville behind, I was flooded by a feeling of melancholy relief. Within a few hours I had ended my life that the veiled woman had described as "false". Nobody would notice my absence until late in the day.

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 3: First Steps

The first days of my journey were an almost spiritual, yet not entirely pleasant experience. I felt as if I had lived my whole life wearing a veil over my eyes. The greater the distance to the bare cliff became, the more surreal the thought seemed to me that I had lived there for twenty-eight years … as a priest. It almost seemed to me as if it had merely been a dream.

After all, who was I?

I was unable to find a satisfying answer to that question. If I did not end my foolish journey and return immediately, in the eyes of the Holy Order I would be a heretic, a pathless one, someone who had strayed from his way. The fact that I belonged to the cleric was only of minor concern. When I thought of Malphas and his 101 verses, doubt and bitterness intersected my feeling of liberation like a mental sword. Yet it felt the same when I thought about returning. The dull feeling in my stomach lurked inside of me. When on the second day of my journey I tried to take a few steps back to Fogville, the very same terrible panic arose that had led to the breakdown in my chamber. No … The only way that I could take now was the one leading through my suppressed memories, away from my false life. I had not the slightest idea where to start looking for the lost fragments of my childhood. I had only been two years old when Gilmon had found me. What could have had happened to shape my life to such an extent? I had only one clue to find answers: the ominous words of the veiled woman. To trust these words was as foolish and irrational as trusting a Qyranian bone reader, but I had no choice.

Follow the fire …

I halted for a moment and wiped the sweat off my forhead. After I had descended from the Fogville cliff, I had taken a small path along the coast. Now I was at the border to the Heartland. Ark was about eleven days' march away, but I intended to use my last pennies to pay a Myrad flight to the capital. The overgrown streets leading through the Endralean forests were too dangerous. At the moment I wandered on a halfway paved path between colorful meadows. The sound of birds was in the air, and the sun was burning on the back of my neck. *You are insane, Jaél … simply insane,* I thought, as I looked back. Indeed, what I did was contradicting everything the holy verses had taught me. Only about seven turns of the moon ago I had accompanied a small group of boys and girls of appropriate age through their consecration. I remembered how a smart, red-haired Aeterna girl spoke to me during one of the preparation lessons. Her hair was fine and straight, as it was usual with the pointy-eared race. "What if I did not want to become a tailoress?", she had asked me after I had explained the importance of their upcoming namesday's ceremony to the children.

"What is your name, young girl?", I answered smilingly.

The determined look had not vanished from her eyes. "Syléna, Father. My name is Syléna."

"Syléna … very well. Let me give you a small riddle. Or rather, let me give you all a small riddle." She had furrowed her eyebrows and looked at me sceptically, more like a grown woman than a young girl. "Imagine yourselves as brave explorers. It is your holy mission, personally assigned to you by the holy leader of the Order, to discover new land far off the Skarrag isles … just as the first pioneers did in Enderal." The helpless or bored looks in the faces of the children had been replaced by curiosity. Only Syléa still looked at me with determination and skepticism. "However," I said pointedly, raising my index finger, "a great disaster happens to you." I paused momentously.

"A thunderstorm. After only half the way, your galley is torn by a severe tempest. You are lucky as none of you is hurt, but you find yourselves on a wild, deserted island. There is nothing but thickets, cold sand and wreckage around you." With the exceoption of Syléa, all of them were drawn into my tale at that time.

"You all know that if you want to survive, you need to act — at once. For not only bitter cold and hunger could be your doom … You can hear a threatening growl from afar, a sound that only a wild Vatyr can bring forth." As I mentioned the hideous, goat-like creatures which usually live in dark and moist caves, some of the children uttered noises of disgust. "So you start collecting wood and building a camp. But soon you realize that some of you are better qualified for certain tasks than others. Ralof, for example, can carry twice as much wood as Syléna because of his strong physique. You, Gilma, are a gifted markswoman, because your father allowed you to practice with the straw dolls in the guard house at an early age. Now — who should keep the first watch and who should go looking for firewood?" All children agreed that Ralof was supposed to carry the wood and Gilma to keep the watch. The game went on until all tasks were assigned to the "pioneers" according to their physical and mental conditions.

"Well. But now something bothersome happens: Ralof feels exploited and does not want to collect any more firewood." The said boy looked indignantly at me, but I calmed him with a gesture of my hand. "Of course he behaves like this only in my story. By all means, he does not want to go looking for firewood anymore. He says he wants to keep watch with Gilma, even though all of you know that he would not be able to hit a blind, paralyzed Troll with his bow. Now my question to you is this: What would be best for all of you? If Ralof came to reason or if he from now on kept watch and Gilma collected the wood instead?" The children voted unanimously for the first choice.

"Very well. Only this way you will be able to defy Vatyrs, hunger and cold on the inhospitable island until a galley arrives and brings you back to Enderal. This is the essence of what the Holy Scripture teaches us: Unity and strength can only emerge in a community that serves the welfare of all and not only of an individual. Malphas himself chooses our divine tasks, for who else knows our strengths and weaknesses better than the one who gives our mothers the gift of fertility each moon? With a satisfied smile my gaze wandered back to the one who initially had asked the question."

"And that, dear Syléna, is the answer to your question. Even if you have doubts about the path that Malphas is soon going to choose for you, defy them as you defy a disease, for only a people united in flesh and mind will be able to prevail eternally." The children's answer was rapt silence. Syléna, however, had not lost her skeptical look after I had told my story that was inspired by the first verse of the Path.

The Path … Had I ever believed in it? I did not know. It was what Mother Pylea had told me. It was what I was supposed to believe. *If even I, an educated man with access to so much knowledge, was able to discover the decayed memories of childhood only after a vision … what about other people? Do they all live a … false life? But if,* it shot through my head, *the Path is indeed a lie … what … what then guides us?* This heretic thought kept me busy until the sun set.

Not before the sun had disappeared almost entirely behind the horizon I recognized signs of human life on the trail again. Like the four days before, I had been wandering through pines and cypresses, encountering no human soul. But now a giant field of wheat lay before me, and in the middle of it stood a windmill high as a tower. Its wheel turned slowly in the evening wind and a mixture of dusty earth, moss and freshly cut grass was in the air. For a moment the rustic beauty of the sight made me forget my aching legs and the dull feeling in my stomach. *People.*

Despite my fatigue I accelerated my steps and soon came to a paved road that was winding between the hills which were overgrown with wheat. After a short while I found what I had been looking for: a shelter. It was full night now, and the orange light that was streaming out of the windows of the old, ivy-covered farmhouse promised protection and rest. A smile lightened up my face and I sighed in relief without noticing it. During the last nights I had rested in small caverns which my back, which was used to my soft bed, did not approve of. *A warm meal* … Suddenly, two horses in full gallop dashed past me. Refelxively, I jumped to the side, and the flank of one of the horses barely missed me. I uttered a scared cry and stumbled as I tried to regain my balance. I landed in the dust with a muffled thud. *What in blazes!?* Indignantly I looked at the two riders who came to a halt in front of me. They both were very tall and wore solid leather garments, just like hunters. Their horses were black, indicating an expensive breed. Angrily I watched them dismounting, throwing a penny to a slender boy who probably was the stable lad, and disappearing into the tavern. Even then, I hated complacent and crude people. Did these two apes even realize that they almost had run me down? *Probably not. And if they did, they would not even look at you.* My lips shrank to a thin line. *Damn primitives.*

But my mind was too exhausted to allow any more angry thoughts. So I shrugged resignedly, picked up my staff from the ground and went to the farmhouse. An overwhelming scent of freshly baked bread filled the air, and my anger was gone. One last time I looked at the tavern sign that was shaking in the wind. *The Red Ox.* This is where I was going to spend the first "civilized" night of my new life.

When I entered the tavern I could hear a pleasant mixture of voices, clanking goblets and crackling fire. The cold left my limbs immediately and my mouth was watering. During my long march, I had

only eaten some pieces of my bread and a few handful of whisperweed, so I was hungry. The tavern was well-frequented which explained the empty streets outside. I assumed that it served as some kind of meeting point for the local farmers. There was space for about thirty souls in the room, and almost all of the chairs, stools and benches were occupied. Torches lit the room and cast dancing shadows of the guests at the walls. I mustered the people. Next to the entrance a tired looking man extensively studied a yellowed picture book called "The Merry Aeterna Damsel". Its saucy images looked as if they were not exclusively drawn for ethnologists. A bearded bard tuned his lute on a shamefully tiny pedestal. He was probably preparing to sing his next song which would be devoured by the noise around him. Just in front of me sat an enviable attractive, well-dressed man who talked to a woman whose countenance showed utter devotion. I estimated him to be thirty-five winters old. His hair was jet-black, his face was masculine yet delicate, and he wore a three-day stubble. Unwittingly, I distorted my mouth. *Certainly he is a one of the prigs from the upper city. One of those who shag around and waste their inheritance.* When I had finished the thought, the beau noticed my staring. For a moment he looked at me with sparkling eyes and smiled, fetching and narcissistic at the same time. Then he turned back to his admirer. The other guests were travelers and farmers of all sorts, man and woman, young and old, tall and short. I felt misplaced, like a northman on a Qyranian bazar, strange and uneasy among the rough people to which I did not belong.

Hastily, I went to the counter which was placed underneath a lower part of the ceiling and behind which various barrels and liquors were lined up. I was just about to speak as I noticed the two clumsy figures who were sitting on the high stools. *The two apes.* Now I had time to muster them. One of them wore a full beard and two strange earrings which gave him the appearance of a buccaneer. His chum had no beard, but he also had a chin that could shatter walls made of Northwind stone. For a moment I felt the urge to grab the mug in front of me and pour beer into their faces. However, the idea vanished when the two noticed me. Unwittingly, I duck my head as they gave me an amused look and turned their attention back to their stew. *They have not even recognized me.* With a slight nod of my head I summoned the barmaid who was cleaning mugs behind the counter. She came closer, sized me up and gave me an amused look. "Matris? What may I get you?" she said with a rough voice. *At least she has the decency to address me as an urban citizen.* I tried not to show my inner turmoil.

"A glass of goat's milk, please."

I was trying to sound masculine and confident, but my voice, coarse and untrained after four days of silence, was a pitiful croak. The reactions could not have been more intense had I asked for the crown jewels of the Golden Queen. While the barmaid only smiled and shook her head in sympathy, the two primitives next to me broke out laughing heavily. "Goat's milk", one of them roared, padding his comrade's shoulder. "He wants a glass of goat's milk!" I stared at the giant with a mixture of irritation and defiance. I probably could have avoided the further events of the evening if I had not responded. Even though numerous snappy answers wandered around in my head, the one I finally gave them, my arms crossed in front of my chest, was pathetic.

"Yes, goat's milk", I said with a shaking voice. "Do you have a problem with it?" This seemed to intensify the amusement of the apes. This time their laughter was so loud that even the bearded bard stopped playing the lute and, as many other guests, turned his insulted yet curious gaze toward the counter. After they had finished laughing and padding each other's shoulders affirmatively, the buccaneer spoke to me. "By no means, Matris!" he said with a sympathetic face. "It's just … Unfortunately, the tavern is out of goat's milk." He paused for a while, grinning. "Maybe you want to try the harlot's inn in the bathhouse of Ark." This time they almost burst with laughter. I felt fierce anger arise in me. Never since I had become a priest I was treated with such disrespect. Never! "I will do that when I visit you next time in the apes' compound."

I froze up. The snappish response had come from my mouth faster than I was thinking, and I had the feeling that the cheerful atmosphere around the two churls faded away. From the corner of my eye I saw that almost half of the guests followed the events apprehensively. *You damn idiot. You damn, miserable idiot.* For a moment, the eyes of the buccaneer and his chum narrowed to a slit. Then the visible anger left their faces and was replaced by a livid feistiness.

"Well, well", he finally started, now with an obviously vicious voice. "So you are a real badass." I wanted to take a step backwards, but the buccaneer had grabbed my wrist with his strong right hand. His grip was hard and firm and his fingers were crude and full of calluses. I felt cold sweat breaking out all over my body. I realized that the man was primitive but dangerous. Half-heartedly, I tried to escape his grip — a convulsion that the two men ignored completely. "I … I am sorry", I stuttered helplessly. I had just finished my sentence when the gorilla pressed his hand on my mouth. He pointedly glanced at his chum, who sneered even more. "I like brave people. But you seem to be exhausted from your long journey." I saw how the other man pushed something to him on the counter. "So how about a little refreshment?"

With his last word he removed his hand from my mouth, quickly grabbed the bowl and poured its content over my head. It was stew, and if the encounter had occurred a few minutes earlier, the broth would probably have scalded my skin. Nevertheless, I was covered in hot, sticky slime. I was shocked and I gasped for air so that some of the broth got into my windpipe. I broke down and panted, coughing out the liquid. The meaty brew dripped down my hair, and some of it found its way into my garment, running down my spine. I heard roaring laughter around me. I was certain that most of it came from the buccaneer and his chum, but some of those who had watched the events before were laughing now as well. I felt how my stomach cramped and shame rose up in me. There I was, broken down, coughing stew, the laughing stock. I had an impulse to jump up and grab the buccaneer's throat, but my reason suppressed it instantly. I was deeply humiliated, but I had no death wish. So I tried to raise myself up in a controlled and dignified manner and removed pieces of meat from my clothes. Indeed, my indifference and serenity would be enough of a lesson for the two brutes. I gathered all my priestly courage and turned around. They looked at me, amused and challenging. *They want me to keep acting defiantly,* I thought. *The want me to keep provoking them.* I did not stand the slightest chance against

any of them in close combat, that was for sure. After all, I had as much knowledge about brawls as a troll about hair care. *Just leave, Jaél. Leave and swallow down you damn pride.* I peered at the crowd. Most of the guests had returned to their meals or conversations. Only a few of them still looked at me expectantly, among them the black-haired beau. Nobody seemed to despise the impudence of the two men at all. Abruptly I realized what had protected me from events like this my entire life: My priest's robe. It had been the only reason why the other boys had stopped mocking me after my consecration. And probably it was the only reason why everyone lowered their heads devoutly or at least had the decency not to pour stew on me when I entered a tavern! *You are a nobody, Jaél. Without your priest's robe you are just another common man, neither big nor slim, neither old nor young, neither ugly nor handsome.* **Meaningless.** For a brief moment I felt the urge to draw the priest's brooch, which I had not had the heart to leave behind, from my bag. Oh, how they would look at me, the primitives. They would begin to recite the Prayer of the Path with eyes widened by fear, asking me for forgiveness. *They would respect me* **what you represent,** *yes, they would bow their head in reverence because they* **fear the power of the Holy Order.** Of course they would. To disregard a priest of the Path was a capital crime, and only a fool would risk such a punishment …

No. To reveal myself as a priest would not only mean to rely on the authority of others, but also to return to my false life. I already felt my stomach contracting warningly.

I had to comply. So I took a deep breath and swallowed my fervent shame. Ignoring the mocking glances of the buccaneers, I silently gave the barmaid a sign that I wanted a room for the night. I had no desire for a meal anymore, even less in the presence of those who had witnessed my humiliation. The barmaid nodded pitifully and told an old man, who sat quietly at the counter and looked undefinably at me, to show me the way. In silence, I followed the old man up to the room. Only when I stood in front of the room's door, I felt how the malice of the brutes, which cut like a sword in my back, began to wane. I gave the old man five pennies and he handed me the key, a burning candle and a cloth for cleaning, which was probably meant as a benevolent gesture, but only intensified my shame. I turned around silently, entered my chamber and locked the door behind me. Then my anger overcame me like a flood. Without taking notice of the bed, I went to the window and stared into the rain. I uttered a suppressed shout, closed my eyes and clawed both my hands into the window ledge. By the black Guardian, I was angry! Of course the rational part of me knew that I had got off cheaply. — In other, rougher taverns people left a brawl with a broken arm or worse. However, I was unwilling to accept the events and put them aside. Did these men have no respect? This kind of scum deserved to be hanged, flayed and skinned, like brigands and marauders, preferably in public. My jaw cramped and I noticed how the feeling in my stomach had started to change. The dull feeling of insecurity had transformed into a flaming rage, paired with an iron determination. *I will not begin my new life in disgrace.* I opened my eyes again and looked at the candle that the innkeeper had given to me. The flame burned and crackled, and in a strange way its fire strengthened my determination. I wanted to teach the two

apes a lesson, even if it was the last thing I did in my life. But how? *What can I do except for preaching, reading books and* **mixing herbs?**

I halted. *Yes* … Now I was almost grateful that the two disrespectful primitives had crossed my way, right here and right now. A malicious grin bloomed on my lips, and I turned my gaze back to the window. For a short moment I marveled about the man who looked at me from the silent glass. His pale blue eyes looked like burning ice, a contradiction that seemed to be as natural to him as the fire of the sun in autumn twilight. He did not resemble the cringing priest anymore who had given the blessing to washwomen only a week ago. Yes, the man emitted something like … power. Determination. **Fire.**

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 4: Ashes

t must have been around two o'clock in the night when I put my plan into action. The voices from below had started to fade around midnight, but I did not want to take any unnecessary risks. I carefully stepped outside my room and looked into the hallway leading to the stairs down to the taproom. However, I quickly drew back my head when I heard muffled, heavy steps rumbling up the stairs. I closed the door behind me and listened. A woman and a man, probably drunk, judging by the irregularity of their steps. Could it be one of the two brutes? No … his voice sounded too bright, too soft and too tired. I waited until they had passed my door and until I heard their door closing. Then I swiftly stepped into the hallway again. Now it was empty. Quietly, I went towards the stairs and peeked down to the taphall. Nothing. Even the maidservant and the host seemed to be sleeping, and only the typical smell of grease, alcohol and sweat told of the numerous guests who had indulged themselves a few hours ago. I nodded contentedly just as to confirm myself and returned to my room. An empty taproom indicated that even outside there was nobody except for a sentinel -maybe a beefy farmer's son who wanted to earn a few extra coins.

Carefully, I checked the utensils that I had concocted for my revenge, and I tied the leather pouch that contained them around my waist. Then I pulled the hood of my vagabond's gear deep into my face and congratulated myself for its purchase again. I opened the window without effort or noise and swung out the blinds that were supposed to protect the room from the cold of the night. Just a little creak. I looked down the wall. I was filled with a feeling of gratification. Indeed, I was less muscular and strong than the brutes, but I was agile and flexible instead. My hands were long and slim, perfectly fit for my purpose. Slowly I climbed out of the window and was filled with a cozy, almost thumping warmness even though a cold wind was blowing. I felt as if I even drew power from the dull feeling inside me. I glanced down and surveyed the situation. I was lucky in two ways: first, the host had given me a room on the second floor, not the third one — and second, just a few feet below me there was the roof of a small porch that was probably sheltering the sentinel from rain. As I descended, I was luck again: The tips of my boots were only a few finger's breadth away from the roof. I inhaled deeply and loosened my grip from the window ledge. A muffled impact was audible, but it was not loud enough to raise suspicion. Now I had to be quick. Any second out here could be the moment that someone got aware of me. Quietly, I walked along the porch and descended from the edge. A gust of wind made my vagabond's garment flutter, just as if nature had decided to accentuate the scene.

The stables where the brutes had put their horses were now in front of me. The building was an unremarkable extension of the tavern, standing in the blue of the night in perfect silence. As I came closer, I heard the heavy breath of horses, the scraping of hooves and the crinkle of hey. Carefully, I

pulled the heavy iron grip at the door. It opened easily. You might well ask why an open stable door did not arouse any suspicion in me. Yet I was too consumed by the blazing determination that my bold plan of revenge had created, so I sneaked inside. Only five horses were in the stable, two of them sleeping. A gray nag in a compartment next to the door glanced at me with an expression that could have been called skepticism, but it soon continued chewing the hey. It was not difficult to find the steeds of my tormentors, pitch black and muscular as they were. They stood at the very end of the horse wing, in a chamber separated by a fragile wooden door. Now the moment had come. Cautiously, I kneeled down at the compartment of the first steed, near the manger. I was unable to fight a feeling of envy as I inspected the animal from up close. Even an amateur like me could see that it was a Scarragian Rock Stallion. For a while, I quarreled with myself. Who were these men that could afford such noble horses? And what was going to expect me if they ever got scent of the fact that I was responsible for what was going to happen to them in the morning? *Maybe all this* **is the first time in your life that you show courage! These two bastards have earned a lesson in humility!**

Of course … The voice was right! I was right! To recoil now would be an act of cowardice, a shame that I did not want to live with. Indeed … these two had earned a lesson in humility, and I was going to give it to them.

My fingers slid into the leather pouch at my side, felt out the small phial and pulled it out. Sheer Cap dust. The eponymous mushrooms usually grew in sparsely vegetated, stony landscapes, and the cliff that Fogville was situated on was exactly such an area. The application of these fungi was one of the first things that Mother Pylea had taught me when I was a novice in the village. Mixing the dry powder with Whispertree Resin resulted in a sticky pulp that considerably accelerated the healing rate if applied to an open wound. As Whispertrees grew in almost all areas of Enderal — except in the barren lands of Thalgard, the Frostcliff Mountains and the Pinnacle Desert — it was highly advisable to take along a phial of concentrated Sheer Cap Powder on extended journeys. The small vessel provided protection from various ailments and afflictions, first of all inflammation, to those who knew the right mixture ratio. However, the Cap's powder had another effect that was unknown to the common people: If it reached the stomach of an unfortunate fellow in an excessive concentration, it triggered something that would be best described as a "cascade of rage". Negative feelings such as grief, hate and anger were amplified many times over. An irascible man would lose his temper even faster than usual. A gloomy, heartbroken woman would be suffering unbearably, leading to a full breakdown. The effect of concentrated Sheer Cap Powder mixed into a meal equaled the feelings that a trained psionic could evoke in his victims. The only difference was that the powder needed seven or eight hours to take effect. In this case, though, I welcomed the delay, as you can imagine. According to my plan, the two brutes, full of arrogance and pride, would be mounting their expensive stallions, only to be thrown to the ground by the befuddled horses in full gallop. The horses would probably be running away, leaving behind the primitives with considerable bruises or fractures — at that time I was shocked by the gratification, or rather lust, that the thought gave me.

A smile formed on my lips as I opened the phial and walked towards the sleeping horses. I did not have to search long for the trough. It contained a pap of hey, mashed apples and rancid water, most likely a meal that the splendid animals were not accustomed to, yet it was tasty enough to what their appetite. I crouched down in front of the bucket that stood at the end of the hallway between the two compartments, poured two small heaps of the powder on my hand and mixed them into the food. Then I carried the trough to the compartment, waved it around in front of the horses and murmured something I considered appropriate to smoothly wake up a warhorse. I did not have to wait long. Sluggishly, the first horse opened an eye an gave me an undefinable glance. Sleepily, it shook its head as if the mental classification of my presence meant too much effort at this late hour, fluttered its lips and dipped its head into the trough. *It is working … Damn it, it is working!* The thrill of anticipation that had filled me when I entered the stable now mingled with a glowing feeling of triumph, and I felt more alive than ever. Strange, indeed? There I was, a young priest of about thirty winters, playing a prank on two brutes who had been bullying me. However, instead of feeling impish or cheeky I saw myself as an impersonation of justice, as an avenging angel who contributed to the betterment of humanity with his action. Well, so the circumstances fit into each other … And the first butterfly flew, as the veiled women would say. I was so consumed in my satisfaction that I did not perceive my surroundings. Therefore I heard the heavy steps behind me only when it was too late.

I felt a heavy paw on my shoulder. Startled, I turned my head, which was my first mistake. Now the buccaneer was able to identify my face which before was hidden in the darkness. He seemed to instantly realize what I was doing.

"You lousy swine!", he snarled, half statement and half question. His breath, smelling of alcohol, was the last thing I heard before he clashed his right fist into my face without waiting for a response. I heard a sharp snap and felt a burning pain shooting up my head. The force of the blow threw me back so that I fell on the sparsely distributed pieces of hey on the floor. My head reverberated as if the pillars of the Sun Temple had burst asunder on it.

"Miserable son of a whore!", I heard the buccaneer amid the noise. "You haven't had enough, have you?" The pain made me ache and I tried to crawl forward. Instantly, I felt an exploding pain in my right side as the giant thrust his rigid leather boot in my side. "Huh? What is your problem, you piece of crap?", he shouted, full of rage. "What is your damn problem?" Another thrust followed, now in my ribs. I heard them cracking noisily, and for a moment I was unable to breathe. I was foolish enough not to understand that the buccaneers "questions" were not questions but expressions of rage, so I held up my hand and tried to give an explanation for my presence here. As a result, his boot hit my head, and my face was dashed on the hard stone floor. I felt hot blood running down my forehead, my cheeks and my nose, and everything went black. Using the last of my strength, I crouched like a child in its mother's womb in order to better endure the force of his attacks. *You miserable fool,* I thought. *You damn fool! He is going to kill you, damn it, he is going to kill you!* These thoughts crossed my mind over and over while I expected his next kick.

But no kick came. I was confused and, between the blood in my eyes, tried to recognize something in the dark. The giant had turned away from me and kneeled before his horse, worriedly caressing it. The soothing words he whispered to the animal made a stark contrast to the brutish crying that had accompanied his attack. *He does not recognize me,* I thought while in pain. *He does not even recognize me as a threat.*

What happened next — and most importantly, what I felt — will be hard to put in words.

I remember how I suddenly felt the leather sheath of my iron dagger. I had considered it to be smart to keep it disguised, and I carried it with me simply because I had forgotten to leave it in my room in the tavern. Everything happened faster than I was able to think — instinctively, bestially. Anyone who had received a well-trained, hard blow on his nose knows how painful it was. However, my experience of pain vanished in an instant, and I felt how the dull feeling in my stomach, the feeling that at the beginning of my failed act of vengeance had become determination and anticipation, began to transform. If a feeling had a form, it changed after my last thoughts were thought. *Degenerate bastard,* it shot through my mind. *First you humiliate me without reason, in front of all the people, and now you* **dare to spoil my revenge?** The anger in my stomach started to smolder, and in a matter of seconds my body was soaked in sweat. I trembled. *He was going to pay for this,* **the subhuman, the worthless piece of filth that considered himself above the law only because of his bloated upper arms and his physique. Indeed … Some people did not deserve a place on this world.** Quietly, bristling with rage, I drew my dagger. My arm was strangely twisted by the kicks, but I ignored the pain, it did not exist anymore. There was only me and my enemy. And then I was there. With a force I did not think my slim arms were capable of I drove the dagger into the brute's back. Surprised and stunned, the gorilla gasped and turned around. Now there was no hint of malice and mocking in his eyes. Instead, I saw bewilderment, as if what was about to happen did not belong to the realm of possibility. Then it changed to plain, bestial rage. He grabbed my throat with both his hands and lifted me so that I dangled like a convict from the gallows. Unconcernedly, the dagger stuck in his back as if it had been there from the day of his birth. I felt how he tried to choke me, but the instant I saw the man's eyes I knew that his time was numbered. It burned inside of me, an archaic, destructive force, and a mixture of rage, euphoria and a flush of victory ran through my veins, my mind and every part of my body. With full force I kicked the tip of my boot between his legs. Instantly, the man uttered a terrified cry, unclamped the hands around my neck and sank down. I did not hesitate for a second. Quickly, I grabbed dagger in his back and pulled it out vigorously, only to stab him again in a different place. This time I felt resistance, so I changed the angle of the weapon and turned it jerkily. The man roared, and now his voice did not sound human anymore. Weak and disoriented he tried to fall backwards and thus throw himself on me, but it was in vain. **You dare to evade your punishment?**, the voice in my head ranted. *After all you did to me you dare to resist me? Huh?!* One more time I hit him with my dagger, and this time I drove it into his thigh. Again he staggered, gasping unintelligible words. This time he did not try to fight back. Instead, he sank to his knees and started to whimper. **He wants me to stop!**,

it shot through my head, and an insane, triumphant grin filled my face. **This piece of crap seriously wants mercy! However,** I did not grant him mercy. Instead, I threw myself upon him and knocked him down to the floor. Now I kneeled over him, and for a short, quirky moment I realized that a stranger who at this very moment had watched our silhouettes must have considered us a couple in love play. A laugh left my throat, and another, louder one. The way he was laying there! The big, remorseless giant looked at me with delirious eyes full of fear like a boy who was about to receive a well-deserved spanking from his father. His steed did not seem to be concerned at all. "Please … please not!", he whispered, and blood gushed out of his mouth.

What happened then will be hard to put in words. First, I was overcome by a wave of demonic joy and broke out in manic laughter. I threw my head backwards and laughed loud and ringing. An ecstatic frenzy swept through my bones, my veins, my body. By the Black Guardian, I felt alive! I felt if I had lived with a veil over my eyes that was now torn away, as if I had considered a shadow on the wall for the thing that had cast it. Like a priest who killed a sacrificial lamb, I grabbed the dagger with both my hands, held it above my head and drove it into the brute's chest. In the very instant when the poignant sound of steel penetrating flesh occurred, something happened that changed my life forever. For a short moment I became the man who I killed. Indeed, I became him and stayed myself at the same time, as paradoxical as it may sound to you. First, a wave of unknown **memories** swept across my mind. I saw the brute, having the blood of a Scarragian man on his hands; I saw him In a dark room, holding a black piece of cloth, weeping; I saw him together with his chum — it was his brother — in a large stone hall, standing in a circle of people who held each other's hands. Each of the images appeared with the force of a striking hammer, and with every new image the tingle increased, the flaming delight in my body intensified and the obsession that controlled my actions grew and became more consuming. **Feed me,** the dark part of my self cried, louder and stronger with each image that appeared to me. **Feed me with his flames!**

With shaking hands and sweat all over my body I pulled the dagger out of the dead body of the giant, only to drive it into his chest one more time, three times stronger than before. Again a wave of images filled my mind in the very moment the dagger hit him, revealing themselves to me with the rhythm of an adrenalin-fueled heartbeat. Every new image bestowed an rise of ecstasy upon me. I uttered a noise that was meant to be a sigh of pleasure, but it left my mouth as a manic, demonic croak. By the righteous way, I experienced a feeling of rapture like never before. **I am alive!,** my thoughts cried while I lifted the blade for the next blow. **I live and I JUDGE!** The blade dashed down again and pierced the lifeless flesh that lay below me. Memories.Ecstasy. His red lifeblood was in my face, hot and sticky, but I did not care, no, I cared about nothing at all for I would **judge, kill, punish! him for his sins, stab for stab, memory for memory, until nothing remained of him, nothing but cold, lifeless ASHES!!**

Even now, almost a year later, I feel my palms grow moist and my breath accelerate when I recall this memory; the ink becomes darker and the quill breaks. But you will not be able to understand my

feelings as a damned being from a non-rational point of view; there are numerous reasons for this. The first reason is that it is very likely you are disgusted by my account. You are right, for I describe a barbaric act in an almost celebratory manner. However, it is the only way to make you understand my thoughts to some extent at least. The second reason however, which is attributable to the first, is the one that weighs most:

There are things you can only truly understand if you experience them yourself. Among them are sex, the ecstasy of pain during a deadly fight, and, not least, the end of life itself, death. How exquisitely we could reason upon the latter, creating explanatory models for its nature — emanating from the Path, the chants of the monks from Arazeal or a philosopher's mind —, yet in the end it will make no difference, we will truly comprehend it in the moment we face it ourselves. The ecstasy that had got hold of my body like the Blue Death got hold of a wild magician's mind was all of the above and none of it. It was the fire. It filled me up and burned in every part of my body. All my limbs felt boiling hot, and my heart beat insanely within my chest. What I had done seemed to me morbidly wonderful, lofty … even stimulating and, in a perverted manner, sexual. I did not believe for a second that I did anything wrong, no, there was no right or wrong, there was only me and the driving force inside of me, originating from somewhere apart from gods, demons and the laws of this world. I was judge, my will was my sword, and the man the convict. There was nothing more. All of my movements were instinctive, archaic, pure. What I did was nothing more than the consequences of intricate circumstances. Just like a wolf that tears apart a lamb, I did only what I, Jaél Tanner's Son, had to do in this moment.

At least until the fire expired.

How late might it have been? The cock's crow had not sounded yet, but a few birds chirped in the dense forest next to the fields of wheat. One of the steeds was still sleeping, defying the laws of sound. The other one just scraped its hooves impatiently on the hey-covereed ground. I had not moved a bit after my final stab. The man who some hours ago had mocked me lay below me, battered and disfigured, and the dark blood on my hands had started to dry. Unmoving and rigid as a wax doll, I kneeled above my work. At one point I had felt something like a "zenith". As mentioned earlier, I had felt more burning and ecstatic with every stab. The flames inside me had grown, grown and grown. Then I felt as if an enormous, infernal pillar of flames shot up from my stomach to my eyes, blazing, hot, searing.

After that, my reason started to return. Less and less I thought with the diffuse voice in my mind, more and more I became Jaél Tanner's Son again, born in Fogville, a pathless priest … and murderer. I realized what I had done, but like a warrior after a nerve-racking battle, my mind and body were too weak, and I was unable to think straight. So I dropped the dagger, put my head back, closed my eyes and listened to the silence. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen.Half an hour. Only when I heard steps nearing the stable, I broke free from my rigor, but I was unable to act accordingly. *A good boy wipes off the dirt*

from his plate, shot through my head all of a sudden. Slowly I turned my gaze. It was the buccaneer's chum.

For a short moment the fire started to glow inside me again, and I smiled an almost indulgent smile at the man who stared at the carnage in disbelief. Then it disappeared, too tired, too weak, sated. The brute's hand started to move towards his sword, slowly and lethargically.

Suddenly he broke down with a choked, dead groan. I blinked, too apathetic to fully comprehend what just happened. A dark shape, veiled in shadows, stood still like a statue behind the collapsed body at the entrance. Then it started to move and approached me. The silver beam of a moon that was almost defeated by the sun shed light on the face of the figure.

It was the beau.

Some steps in front of me he halted and stemmed his hands against his hips. He appeared to me like a docker who examined the payload that had to be carried from the ship to the wharf in hours of hard work. Then he smiled, engaging, perceptive and scornful.

"You actually have it", he spoke in a pleasant baritone, fascinated.

"What?"

The beau laughed.

"Well, what?!" He paused and for a moment seemed to look right through me. Then his eyes met mine again, and I perceived in them a curious change that I was unable to comprehend at that time.

"The fire."

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 5: Qalian

The man before me towered over me by half a head. His physique was athletic, but not heavy, his eyes pitch black and sparkling. Yet it was his smile which caught my eye. It was peculiar and crooked, and it made me believe that there was nothing that could impress this man. It was neither naïve like the smile of a child, nor was it cynical like that of an old man who had seen too much.

There he was, and both of us looked absurd: Me, a thin, ugly man, kneeling on the dead body of a giant, my hands soaked in blood, my face apathetic, my weapon lying next to my feet. He, tall, handsome, wearing elegant clothes, his arms crossed, observing me curiously.

Suddenly I broke into loud laughter. I threw my head into my neck and started to laugh, loud and resounding, the laughter of a man who was overwhelmed by the situation he found himself in so that his brain left him no other choice. I tried to get up from the body and slipped as my hands did not find any support on the blood-soaked floor. Lengthways, I fell on the corpse, feeling the warm blood on my body. *You have not eaten up*, it shot through my head. *Bad Jaél!*

Instead of bringing me back to reality, the nonsensical thought fueled my laughter even more. I rolled on my back, clutched my stomach and gasped for air. The man, whose name was unknown to me then, reacted in a similarly odd manner. First he rubbed his chin with his thumb and index finger and furled his eyebrows. He acted like a farmer whose sheep had started to bleak and jump around as if it had been bitten by the Black Guardian. Then, however, he started laugh as well. For me and my overwhelmed, confused mind the situation became even more absurd. I gasped for air as the laughter grew so strong that my lungs threatened to fail. Then, as hot tears ran down my cheeks, I heard a muffled sound. My sight faded to black and I lost consciousness.

I woke up with a metal taste in my mouth. My eyelids were heavy and glued shut, and my sight was blurred when I opened them.

I found myself in a forest, under a small edge at a rock surrounded by dark pine trees. Around the shelter, rain poured down. Only the fire that burned about an arm's length away kept me from feeling cold. I tried to turn my gaze so I could fully conceive my surroundings, but a biting pain exploded in the back of my head. I gasped and instinctively pressed my lips and eyelids together.

“Good evening”, I suddenly heard a voice saying nearby.

I was scared and tried again to turn my gaze, only to be punished by a more severe pain. This time, a short cry escaped my mouth. The voice next to me reacted with laughter. Then I heard someone stand up and walk over to me. Eventually, I saw a pair of boots, and someone kneeled before me.

It was the beau. He wore his chin-long hair in a small topknot which gave him the look of an Arazealean monk if it were not for the elegant clothing.

"I am sorry about the bump", he said and smiled apologetically, "I must have exaggerated a bit."

I looked at the man in confusion. My memories of the day before were pale and remote. The tavern … The humiliation by the two brutes. My plan for revenge … The stable.

The insight hit me like a beam of lightning striking an old tree on a clearing.

I had killed him. **Massacred him.**

I pressed my hands on my mouth and felt myself shivering all over. Every detail of last night's events hit me like a hammer. How the brute caught me in the act and dashed me to the ground. The pain as he his kicked me over and over with his boots. The rising of blazing rage. The smacking sound of the dagger that penetrated his back. His bewildered face, his silent begging for mercy. My frenzy, my satisfaction, my ecstasy that grew stronger with every stab.

Without any warning, I vomited on my clothes. I coughed and gagged, and I felt tears rising in my eyes. *Slaughtered. You have slaughtered him!*, it shot through my head, again and again. I was so consumed in my thoughts that I entirely forgot about the existence of the man in front of me. Finally, when I remembered the moment when I lost my consciousness, I stared at him in disbelief.

He had not moved a bit and still kneeled in front of me. His mouth smiled, but his eyes were earnest, almost devout. What did it mean? Did he knock me down? He must have done it … and brought me here. *But ... why?*

As if he had read the question in my eyes, he started to move. He shook his head and pointed at a small bag next to my sleeping place. I looked at him with uncertainty, and his grin widened.

"What is it? You look at me if I was Dal'Thalgard's ghost."

I felt my tension ease up a bit. Still, I was unable to speak a word, whereupon the man pursed his lips.

"Go have a look inside your bag … unless you have a thing for decorating yourself with your own vomit."

Only now I hesitantly followed his suggestion and found a large cloth that was embroidered in blue and white. I looked at him again, like a child that received something it never before had held in its hands.

He furled his eyebrows skeptically, and I realized that my behavior probably seemed odd to him. *Does it really seem odd? After all, he was the one who had brought me here. And he* knows *what had happened.* Grudgingly, I crossed my legs and started to wipe away the remains of Whispertree Resin that I had consumed yesterday from my robe.

The man observed all of my movements attentively. Then he stood up and turned toward the sparkling flames. I noticed that there was something cooking over the fire. *Drink.* The bile made my mouth feel unpleasantly bitter and my throat was dry as the dunes of the Pinnacle Desert. For a moment I felt hunger, but the memories of yesterday's events made it disappear at once. The man ladled something from the kettle, and a faint wind carried a smell of sugar mint and honey to my nose. Then he turned toward me, carrying a bruised cup in each of his hands. He gave me one of them and sat down on a tree stump.

"It's only that bad the first time."

I flinched. "Pardon me …?"

"You surely understand me."

For a moment his gaze went astray. Then he shook his head, almost unrecognizably, and turned toward me again. "But where are my manners?" He knocked his fist against his chest, a military salute that in my eyes seemed inappropriate to his person.

"I am Qalian." He looked at me expectantly, and when I did not respond, he asked: "And who are you?"

At first I was inclined to tell the man a false name, but I decided against it.

"Jaél. Jaél Tanner's Son."

The man took off his glove, reached out to me, and I shook his hand. His grip was warm and firm.

"So, Jaél. Very pleased to meet you." He smiled and looked straight into my eyes without blinking. I felt an awe of veneration running down my spine. *What a presence.* I remembered the woman who had sat next to him the other day. Now I understood why she had looked at him with such devotion.

Uneasily, I lowered my head. For a moment I envied Qalian's appearance, his demeanor and his endearing manners. Despite the thousands of questions whirling in my head, I could not help but like the stranger. I was certainly not the first one who made this experience. He radiated a kind of venturesomeness that seemed powerful enough to tempt fate itself.

Qalian withdrew his hand and took a sip of tea.

"Well. Where do we start?"

I looked at him helplessly.

"Start … with what?"

"The questions, of course" He smirked. "Don't tell me you don't have any."

He looked at me appraisingly. "Or maybe I should start. Where do you come from, Jaél? You do not look like a man of the world."

"I come … from a small village", I replied carefully. When Qalian only raised his eyebrows, I added "Fogville"".

"Fogville … Not a very exciting place."

Now I was the one who raised the eyebrows. "You know Fogville?"

Qalian made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "I once stopped there on a … mission. You have a cozy tavern." He smiled. "And a few beautiful women."

"… Yes, of course." *What in the name of Malphas does that guy want from me?* Yesterday he had caught me in the act. *He knows.* And now we were skirmishing with each other like two hunters who had met in a tavern over a mug of mead. I decided to make a foray, not out of courage or bravery, but because I could not bear the unsaid words anymore.

"Listen … Qalian." I felt a clump forming in my throat and quickly drank a sip of my tea. It was so hot that I asked myself how he had been able to drink it without burning his lips.

"How did I get here?"

Qalian smiled leniently. "I brought you here." He seemed to notice the irritated look on my face and added: "… after I had struck you down. Let's say … you had problems coping with the situation."

There was a moment of silence. "I took care of the bodies."

The word hit me like a hammer, and again I felt bile rising up my gullet. This time, however, I was able to suppress to urge to vomit. As a result, I had a terrible taste on my tongue. I coughed and stared at the man with uncertain eyes. *He talks as if all of this was perfectly normal.* But it was not, damn it! I had committed a crime, and even worse than the crime itself was the manner in which I had committed it. *I am a monster! A god-forsaken monster!*

As if he had read my mind, he bent forward a bit.

"I know what you think now, Jaél. You feel guilty, don't you? You feel like a monster, or some such thing?"

I looked at him in unease. Then I turned my gaze away, which he seemed to interpret as an approval.

"Forget about that nonsense. What you did was the right thing."

A sad laughter escaped my throat. "The right thing?"

"Yes. But wait." He rubbed his chin with his thumb and his index finger and looked into the fire.

"Let me tell you a story. Then you will understand."

I nodded, superfluously, for he already started to narrate.

"Once, there was a family. Five people. A woman, her two husbands, and two children." He seemed to notice that I wrinkled my forehead. "And they came from Qyra. For in Qyra, they live differently, you know? There are not only couples, but also people living in larger families, called circles. Anyway …" He shortly paused and drank some tea. "… this family was not a lucky one. One of the husbands, called Keshan, had just lost his job on a sugar cane plantation outside Al-Rashim, the capital. The wife, who worked as a weaver with a wealthy merchant, also lost her job when the merchant experienced financial troubles. All in all the situation in Al-Rashim was troublesome. The streets were dangerous, the Meat Maggot Plague was raging, and it was no good time for people who lived in a circle with two children and who had no Penyals in their pockets. So they decided to find happiness elsewhere."

His eyes went astray. "Towards a new world, a new life. And so" — he turned towards me again — "they spent their very last money for a journey to Enderal. However, when they arrived in Ark they realized that life here was not at all as they had imagined. Even in the Foreign Quarter, prices were too high for them, and none of them, except for one of the husbands, spoke Endralean. Therefore, they moved to the Undercity."

For a moment, I thought I saw melancholy in his amber eyes. "Do you know the Undercity, Jaél?"

"I … Yes, I've heard of it."

He nodded. "Well. So you know that it is not a friendly place for families. The streets are dangerous. Blackmail and murder are the order of the day. It is a slum, and the most cynical thing about it is the fact that the cavern in which it was erected lies directly underneath the Upper Quarter of Ark, where noblemen have masquerade balls and philosophize about morals and ethics." With the last part of the sentence, rage flashed through Qalian's eyes. It stayed there for a moment and disappeared as fast as it had arrived.

"Anyway, the small family moved into one of the shabby box-shaped homes in an alley called Canal Street. The street lived up to its name — stinking, dark and narrow. Even though it was definitely not the new beginning that the circle had envisioned, the three parents did not become discouraged. They knew about the obstacles and were determined to overcome them.

"Aside from that, their faith in Irlanda strengthened them. In their tiny house, which consisted only of one room divided by cloths, they had erected a shrine. Every evening, they prayed to their goddess, and they drew courage and strength from it. Indeed … Things seemed to get better when Kesahn was

hired on a farm outside the walls of the city. Now, you might not understand how peculiar this was. But let me tell you that it is more likely that a Vatyr learns to read and write than that someone from the Undercity — and, to make matters worse, someone with a dark skin — finds decent and honest work with a farmer in the Heartland.

"Keshan was aware of this, for he and his circle had learned that there were people who hated them because of their origin alone. And these were not merely people from the Upper City. Even their neighbors shouted 'shagarounds' or 'charcoal people' at them on the streets. For the world is like this, my friend. People are afraid of what they do not know — families with multiple parents, Aeterna, people with black skin. All foreign things are dangerous to them."

"Yet Keshan fought even harder. Every morning he got up, long before the first cockcrow, and walked the arduous way to the farm where he worked. He returned long after the sun had set. Work was hard, but he was grateful for the opportunity to give his family, especially his two children, a better life."

Qalian stopped, picked up a piece of firewood and threw it into the fire. Then he continued.

"But things turned out differently, of course. For among all the noble people who live in Ark, there is a … well, a 'faction'. It calls itself the Citadel and understands itself as a "bastion" of traditional values, as they put it.

"At some point, they got wind of the charcoal man, who took away a hardworking, honest Enderalean's job on a farm. The Citadel's members knew what they had to do. One night, when Kesahn returned to his little house in Canal Street, he sensed that something was wrong. He was unable to put a finger on it, he just felt it like a mother felt that something had befallen her son."

"What exactly had happened, he found out when he entered his home. All of them were dead. Both his children, Lilyea and Garral. His husband, Jashek. And his wife, Zamira. His children he found in a corner, crouched together and wrapped in a bloody cloth. They had cut Lilyea's throat and Garral's thigh artery. Jashek seemed to have fought back, as he had been stabbed several times in his chest before he was beheaded. Zamira lay flat on the table, and the blood between her legs was clear evidence of what had been done to her before she was killed. Just as Keshan wanted to cry out, he felt a burning pain in his back and fell to the ground, dead."

Qalian had narrated the last part of his story without blinking his eyes. Stunned and speechless, I looked at him. Again he returned my look without blinking.

"Tell me, Jaél, what do you think about my story? Do you like it?"

"Is it … true?", I asked, for want of a better reply.

"Yes, it is true."

I looked at Qalian, seeking advice. *What in blazes does he expect from me?*

"That's terrible."

Qalian nodded. "Exactly. And what would you say if I told you that the two men that we have killed yesterday were members of the Citadel?"

I was petrified. "Pardon me?"

"The two apes who now lie dead at the ground of the pond." I did not notice that he used exactly the same word for them as I did in my thoughts. "They were members of the Citadel. And they have murdered the family of the Qyranian. All for the greater good, of course." Again, there was cold rage in his eyes.

"I do not understand", I replied, even though I did.

Qalian narrowed his eyes to a slit. "Oh yes, you do. Salbor and Adreyu Mithal. They are sons of a wealthy ruler from Enderal's north, and they are murderers."

For a short, irrational moment I was flooded with triumph. *They have deserved to die!* The corners of my mouth twitched. But then the images flashed before my eyes and the terrible memories returned. Memories of the joy that I had felt when I had stabbed the man, massacred him. *The blood* …

"But I was not aware of it. Even if …" I stopped mid-sentence and lowered my gaze. How only could I in any way describe the way I felt? For a moment there was silence between us. Just when I wanted to ask a question, Qalian did something unexpected. Before I knew what happened to me, he was right before me, leaving only two hands' width between our faces. I would have flinched, but something in Qalian's gaze paralyzed me. I was unable to move, stiff as a wax figure. For an instant I was unable to notice the change in him, but then I realized it.

His eyes were blazing. First I thought that it was a reflection of the campfire, but when I saw that the fire burned behind Qalian, I knew that his eyes indeed had changed their color. They seemed like glowing coal, like a candlewick just before it is completely consumed by fire. His features had lost the joviality that was present in the past thirty minutes.

Then he began to speak, quietly, but sound and clear. The tone of his voice sent shivers down my spine.

"The scum deserved to die, Jaél. They *were corrupted."* He made no move to explain the last word. "I was in the Red Ox because I was chosen to murder them. You had beaten me to it, and you have done me and the world a favor."

I did not know where I took the strength from to answer, but I did, even though my words were only a whisper, like a deathbed confession. "But I savored it."

Disgust aroused in me once again. A dull fear, the burden of a man who knew that he had done something terrible. My shoulders slumped and I lowered my head as if it was Malphas and not Qalian to whom I had just confessed the ecstasy during the murder.

But Qalian did not allow me to get overwhelmed. He put his right hand on my shoulder and with his left hand turned my face so that I looked directly at him. Then he spoke, slowly and clearly.

"I know, Jaél. Do you know why?"

He did not give me any time to reply.

"For you have felt what they had done. You have felt their crimes and their guilt, and the ecstasy was the reward for your courage." He paused. "It was the nectar of their sins."

Then, with a short, fleeting moment, it was over. The glow in Qalian's eyes was gone. He sat back, and a look at his face made me wonder if my mind had played a trick on me. He remained silent.

After minutes of silence, I asked the crucial question, without even knowing what I really wanted to ask.

"Why?"

But Qalian understood.

"Because you are special. And because the blood that runs in your veins is the same as mine … and as that of our brothers and sisters."

I stared at him in a baffled way. My mental capacity was exhausted. *Brothers and sisters?* I could not go any longer — my eyelids were leaden and my limbs were faint and weak.

Qalian seemed to notice.

"There is a long journey ahead of us. I will explain everything you need to know, but now go to sleep." The glimmer that I had seen in his eyes before returned for a moment. "Dusk is nearing."

The next morning we headed towards Ark.

You might ask yourselves why I followed the strange man, and I cannot give you a clear answer to that question. Surely, many things would have turned out differently if I had slipped off in the gray mist of the morning, but my exhaustion did not allow me to leave. Another reason for me to stay was perhaps that all the things that had happened to me in the week before seemed bizarrely familiar to me. I probably would not have left anyway, since Qalian's words had a hypnotic effect on me which I was unable to explain to myself. *It was the nectar of their sins.* A thousand questions were haunting my mind. Nevertheless, the knowledge that the murder I had committed was >*a good and righteous deed* served as

a straw that my plagued mind could cling to. It was a peculiar feeling to have killed a man. Young soldiers and guardsmen have colorful dreams about honor and glory. When they think about thrusting a sword into unrighteous man's chest, they believe it to be a sublime feeling. Even though the experience had been sublime for me, the aftermath was not. My state shifted between an emotionless paralysis and lightning-fast epiphanies filling me me with guilt and disgust which overcame me like the autumnal floods at the coast of Myar. At these moments one wonders *if killing can be justified at all.* The more often you perform the act of killing, though, the less doubts you have. The coldness grows until the taking of a life becomes trivial.

Back then, however, this way of thinking was unfamiliar to me. When in the light of the setting sun Qalian offered me a bowl of hot, steaming oatmeal and blood-red wild berries, I was overcome with nausea even before I ate a spoonful of it. Did I notice a hint of guilty conscience in Qalian's eyes — or was it amusement? I did not know.

While we packed our belongings I asked him about the meaning of yesterday's testimony once again. He only shook his head and told me that meaning of the "fire" could not be learned by conversation alone, such as swimming could not be learned by reading treatises about the consistency of water.

And so the both of us, as different as day and night, headed towards the legendary capital. He was well dressed, handsome and always confidently smiling. I was dressed in worn-out clothes, had a hooked nose and the puzzled look of a man who had no idea what was happening to him. The first two days of our journey were terrible. I barely ate, and most of the time I thought I could see blood on my hands or hear human death cries among the singing of the birds. Even the silence did not calm me down. *Please, not.*

But on the third day things started to get better, and for the first time since I had met Qalian, I did not feel the weakening nausea every time I halted and allowed my thoughts to wander. Of course my state of mind was far from joyful, but in an odd way, I felt better than after my departure from Fogville. There was a simple reason for this: The fear was gone from my stomach. Or, in better words: I felt as if I had appeased it, like a wild animal that just had a good meal, knowing that there was more to come. *I am on the right way.* How strange these words sounded in my mind. But yet I felt alright. As if I had glimpsed a light on the horizon, a light I should have been following all my life.

My sense of guilt began to diminish as well. Even though there was no way for me to verify Qalian's story, I knew that it was right. The arrogant faces, the vile voices — these two men had been *evil.* **Corrupted.** *And there would have been more victims after Keshan's family.* The more time I spent thinking such things, the more truthful they rang in my mind.

While we were wandering, Qalian told me a lot of other things. Great deals of it were stories from his past. I now knew that he came from Nehrim, a fact that explained his subtle accent. He grew up in Cahbaet, the capital of the Northrealm. Just as the Middlerealm, it was under the rule of chancellor

Barateon, but Qalian assumed that a civil war between the northern separatists and the chancellor was imminent within the next ten years. His migration to Enderal had many reasons, and with a look that was rejecting, yet not harsh, he indicated that I was not ready to know about these chapters of his past.

After a week's march we arrived in Ark.

I do not wish to spoil ink with descriptions. I am sure that the capital of Enderal is well-known to you, and you might imagine how overwhelmed I was by its sight. We first saw it from a small mountain ledge, and I spent minutes watching the city bathing in the light of the setting sun.

“Impressive, isn't it?”, I heard a voice next to me. It was Qalian.

I murmured something without turning my gaze. He gave off a laugh.

“Indulge! Sometimes, the first time is the best time”, he said and sat down at the edge of the cliff, a chasm of about four hundred arms length's depth. I looked at him and saw that he had closed his eyes and let the evening sun shine on his face. Again, I felt envy rising. If a young woman had come up the hill, she would have considered him to be the hero of a bard's song. But at the same time I knew that Qalian did not show off. He simply enjoyed the view, the moment and the sunlight — an ability I had not developed in my life.

It was already dark when we showed our papers to the city guards and asked for entrance. We pretended to be merchants from Arazeal who had to put in at the harbor of Duneville due to the unfavorable weather. After checking the papers quickly, the guardswoman allowed us to pass. When the heavy gates shut behind us and the portcullis came down with a loud noise, any remaining thoughts about a return to my old life as a priest vanished.

We made stop at a tavern called “The Dancing Nomad”. Qalian opened his bulging purse and invited me to a stew of sugar beets, dark bread and very expensive beer from Cahbaet. This time we did not talk much. Instead, we listened to the music of a beautiful, red-haired bard whose dark voice was in stark contrast to her fragile physique. She sang traditional tunes such as “The Song of the Aged Man”, the “Pathless Wanderer” or “The Maid in the Silver Glow”. I looked down in unease as Qalian started to sing along to the last song in full voice. Only when I noticed that people did not object his good, but not brilliant singing, but started to join in, my ungrounded shame faded away and I felt increasingly comfortable.

We stayed in the taproom until late. When only five other guests were with us, I asked the question that had been burning on my lips.

“What now?” I spoke quietly, dazed by alcohol and the loudness of the past hours.

Qalians gaze met mine, and he did not lower it until I directed mine towards the ground in unease. I heard Qalian emitting a sound that could have been a muffled laughter as well as a sigh.

"Now we are going to sleep like logs. And tomorrow" — his eyes sparkled for a moment — "the first lesson awaits you."

I had no idea what his words meant.

"The first lesson?"

He smiled.

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 6: The Silver Cloud

One of Qalian's skills that I never learned to understand was to get by with almost no sleep. During our journey, he went to bed late after midnight, and he always managed to be awake before me, mostly long before dusk. He had a strict morning routine: It started with a half hour long prayer in a language that I did not understand. Then he practiced with his scimitar for a good hour, and a bit longer on two days of the week. After that, he took a bath, or, when there was no river or lake nearby, sprinkled some water over himself. Finally, he prepared a breakfast of cereal pulp mixed with bitter herbs, which he meditatively devoured as if all mysteries of the Pyraeans were hidden in it. I guessed he only slept a maximum of four hours per night, and I wondered how he managed to look healthy and energetic like after a bath in the waters of Inodan.

On our journey he had let me sleep, but on our first day in Ark he woke me up early in the morning. My limbs felt leaden after the night of carousing. For a moment, my sleepy gaze tried to find the water trough that I had used to wash myself every morning in Fogville. Then I realized where I was. I groaned, hove myself out of bed and looked outside. *By the right Path, how late is it?* There was no sign of the sun yet. As if he had read my thoughts, Qalian answered my question.

"Two more hours before the cock's crow, my friend. Before you say anything,"— he was just about to strap his sword to his waist — "it is necessary. We have an appointment."

I wanted to answer, but only a sullen murmur left my mouth. Qalian continued.

"Meet me in an hour in front of the last house of Cloud Alley. I will wait for you there."

He left the room before I was able to reply anything. For a moment, I was baffled and kept sitting on the edge of my bed. Then, I stood up with a sigh and went over to the window. Absentmindedly, I looked over the roofs of the sleeping city. No cloud hid the silver light of the moon, and despite the early hour, there were several people on the streets. I withdrew into myself. In fact, I felt quite well despite the headache that was a result of inebriation. I rarely thought about the events in the Red Ox anymore, but now I remembered Qalian's words: *You have felt their crimes and their guilt, and the ecstasy was the reward for your courage. It was the nectar of their sins.*

Could this be the reason why the murder left me cold? Because it was … justified?

I thought: *Please not!*

I thought: **Something good.**

Uttering a cheerful and at the same time desperate sound, I shook away the thoughts. Instead, I looked at the activity below. I saw three emaciated children carrying heavy sacks along the big street that led across Ark. Directly behind them, three armored figures, most likely guards, were patrolling. Two women, one of them big and muscular, the other one slim, were pulling a wheelbarrow with a barrel and three bundles of hay into an alley that led to the rear exit of the tavern.

Full of thoughts I turned away from the window and got dressed. After I had eaten a meal in the taproom, I started on my way, feeling a mixture of curiosity and anxiousness.

I do not want to bore you with unnecessary details of my first journey through Ark, for you probably know where the street was situated. I did not know then. Only after a guard eyed me suspiciously and pointed me towards a half-decayed warehouse, I realized where I was, and that I had arrived fifteen minutes before the appointed time. Cloud Alley, as the builders of the city had named it without any apparent reason, marked the end of the Artisan Quarter. It was the way which led to the large stone gate that every decent Upper Town citizen hoped never to enter.

It marked the entry to the Undercity.

I looked around insecurely. I knew about the Undercity from countless stories, including Qalian's. It was a place to be avoided unless one was dealing with concealers or criminals, or living in such poverty that one of the shabby huts down there was the only affordable home. Regardless of how I had imagined the contrast between the beautiful capital and the misery of the Undercity, my thoughts always included a kind of "transition" between prosperity and poverty. But there did not seem to be such a thing. Looking up, I saw the impressive Myrad tower, where wealthy travelers arrived in the city or departed to other places on the eponymous winged animals. Next to me a large waterfall came pouring down, and if I had walked up the small alley again on which I had left the winding marketplace a few minutes ago, I would have found myself in the heart of the Artisan Quarter. Irritated, I again looked at the wooden door, which was guarded by two heavily armed men. Was this door really the entrance to the other, unpleasant world?

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Qalian.

“You found it. Very well”, he said. “Are you ready?”

I screwed up my eyes. I now knew that my first lesson had to do with the Undercity. But what exactly was expecting me?

“I think so. And … what are we going to do?”

Qalian chuckled. “Quite simple, my friend.” He took the knapsack from his shoulders, went down to his knees and started to search for something. The he looked up to me again.

“We are going to have fun.”

My doubts that the Undercity was indeed behind the large, guarded wooden door vanished a few moments after the guards had granted us entry. *They must think that we are crazy,* I thought as both wings of the door swung open. No citizen of the Upper Town went there voluntarily, for it was well-known that the Order and the Guard were virtually powerless down there. Unofficially, everyone knew about the silent agreement between the Order and the Rhalâta, the association of shady characters: You stay among yourselves, and we stay among ourselves.

Therefore, the Undercity was a town within the town, and it was much gloomier then the Ark overground with its rustic but cozy half-timbered houses, fountains and theaters. Down there, the Rhalâta controlled every aspect of life, and whoever was unfortunate enough to live there, no matter if they wanted or not, had to bow to them. Shuddering, I remembered what a traveling merchant once had told me. His story revolved around a young tradesman who only a few moons before had received the coveted badge of the Golden Sickle, which denoted him as a sound businessman. This young man wanted to take the short road to wealth, and with the help of a few lads from Ark he started to collect Glimmercap dust. Its production was more or less an official privilege of the Rhalâta, yet this fact did not keep the young man from sending the group of unsuspecting boys to a cave near the west coast to begin his own — unobtrusive, as he believed — trade with the deadly narcotic.

For almost a moon's turn business went well, and his purse was filled faster than the mugs of a popular tavern. One morning, however, when he rode to the grotto where the mushrooms were collected, he found it deserted. There was only a cart with four man-sized baskets in front of the entrance. The baskets were filled to the top with Glimmercap mushrooms, but they emitted a strange odor. When the merchant told his bodyguard to shovel the content out on the ground, different body parts rolled out of each of the baskets: Arms, legs, torsi, heads. The heads had been cut off carefully so that there was no doubt about their owners: Five of them belonged to the unfortunate boys who had been hired by the merchant for a modest earning. Two of the heads belonged to the merchant's daughters. The eighth one was his companion's head. On her forehead, the following words had been carved in: "Sha'Rim Rhalâta"— the Rhalâta does not forget.

They let the merchant live. He was never again seen in the Golden Sickle guild house, and rumor has it that he took his own life a few months later. Thus ended the old traveling merchant's story.

And now we are here. I felt uneasy. Everything about us screamed "Upper Town" and "wealth" — our gestures, our expensive clothes, Qalian's dagger. Behind the door, stairs led down into the darkness. It took us more than fifteen minutes before we encountered signs of human life. The air was cold and humid. It smelled like ammonia, mold and wet stones. We came to the end of the long stone stairway. Wooden planks marked a path that led into a tunnel that was about thirty arm's lengths high. The first hut we passed had been built so tightly into a natural corner of the rocks that I hardly perceived it. Mighty, rusty ducts came out of the walls and disappeared into the floor, winding around the brittle

pieces of wood that the house was constructed of. Chests and barrels, some of them broken, were piled up at the walls that were not bordered by the stone of the cavern.

Meanwhile, more and more inhabitants had noticed our presence. Some of them looked at us with suspicion and swiftly turned their gaze away, others bluntly stared at us. While we passed more huts, we even saw constructions with roofs in front of them, probably something like market stalls. Fish, spices, unhealthily looking bread and other wares were displayed on them. Qalian did not seem to mind the people's gazes. He accelerated his pace and disappeared behind a corner. I followed him, and what I saw took my breath away.

Before me was a vast cavern with a ceiling so high that two guard towers, on top of each other, could have have fit in. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like icicles of stone. In the distance, an impressive waterfall was pouring out of the crag. Throughout the cavern, houses of dark wood were erected on platforms, connected by stairs and bridges, supported by piers and natural stone pillars. The houses became increasingly higher toward the walls of the cave, so that the scenery was reminiscent of a gigantic amphitheater. In the center, the buildings were erected on the bare stone floor. In form and appearance they differed from the houses on the platforms. I saw a stone building that, with its high roof and pointy tower, looked like a small temple. A dozen arm's lengths next to it was a multi-story building. It was also made of stone, and its windows emitted a reddish, milky glow. Numerous people were bustling about, and even though I had a good look over the round, open space that most likely was the center of the subterranean city, it was so dark that I could barely make out silhouettes. The Undercity — a name well deserved.

A beefy man passed by and bumped into me, suddenly rousing me from my thoughts. I sighed and wiped the sweat from my forehead that had accumulated there despite the cold air. Then I looked for Qalian who had walked ahead. I found him at the foot of a stairway, beneath a leafless, crooked tree. He was talking to someone. Hastily, I went down the stairs. As I came close to them, the stranger pointed towards me, and Qalian made a placating gesture. Only when I came close, I realized that it was a woman. Her hair was short and blonde, a stark contrast to her soft face with full, red lips. However, her eyes … I felt something glow in my stomach, protesting, angry. Her eyes were ice-cold blue, so lurid that they seemed to shine even in the faint light of the cavern. Even though they were objectively beautiful, they aroused a feeling in me which I was unable to analyse. They appeared **cold.**

Before I was able to consider the voice that sounded inside me again, Qalian started to speak.

"Jaél, may I introduce you …?" He pointed at the young women with his open hand, his palm directed upwards. "This is Yaléna."

I tried to respond, but I failed.

Yaléna examined me shortly, from head to toe, and then turned her gaze away from me.

“He seems to be going to pee his pants. Are you absolutely sure? It's not too late yet.”

Qalian smiled charmingly and nodded. “I am. And you can trust him, you have my word.”

The woman bit her lips and furrowed her eyebrows. Then she returned Qalian's nod.

“Very well. Let's go.”

We started to move. Maybe it was only my imagination, but I had the impression that the number of hateful looks around us had increased. The air and the darkness in the cavern suddenly felt even heavier. Qalian looked at me over his shoulder. There was no trace of fear or uneasiness in his eyes. In a certain way they even gleamed with anticipation. But why? I was aware of the fact that there were many shifty people around here. Yet why seemed Qalian and our guide to be so familiar with each other?

Our destination was a dark alley directly next to the multi-story house with the red windows. A sign at the entrance identified it as “The Silver Cloud”. Determinedly, the woman stepped into the dark, and we followed her. There was absolute darkness in the shadows of the buildings, and my uneasiness grew when I saw that our guide, at the end of the alley, walked into an even smaller one. *This is a labyrinth, and a damn dangerous one.* There were no people, only heaps of rubbish and puddles of feces. There were only two encounters. — First, we saw two men warming themselves at a campfire. As Yaléna saw the fire from afar, she accelerated her steps and kicked one of the men at his head with full force. He uttered a choked cry and fell down, while the other man, terrified, tried to raise himself up against the wall. Yaléna did not allow him to. She bent towards him, holding her face close to the face of the beggar, and murmured something about “open fire”, “alley” and “the siblings”. Then she dashed him to the ground and told us to move on. Our second encounter with human beings in this dark, subterranean maze was with a figure that was draped in sheets, leaning on the wall of a house. I barely recognized her because of her veiling. As I passed by, however, she grabbed my thigh with her bony fingers. I uttered a cry and turned around. She removed a sheet that was covering her head, revealing a face hardly older than my own, but covered by festering, pulsating ulcers. *Meat maggots.* She whispered something which sounded like a craving plea, but only a guttural, rattling noise left her mouth. Jerkily, I withdrew my leg from her claw and hurried after Qalian and Yaléna.

When we finally arrived after what felt like an eternity, I was exhausted as if I had been briskly wandering for a day. I feared never to get rid of the disgusting odor that stuck on me.

Yaléna halted at a thick steel door and knocked twice. A few moments later a hatch opened and two eyes under bushy brows looked outside. As they recognized our leader, I heard the noise of a creaky latch, and the door opened. The door guard was an unremarkable man with croppy hair who reminded me of myself in an unpleasant manner. He looked at us appraisingly, but his gestures showed that he was Yaléna's subordinate. With relief I noticed that the building, unlike I expected because of its exterior, was clean, and lit by several candlesticks on the walls. There was even a slight scent of lavender

in the air, which after the omnipresent odor of feces during the last hours seemed to me like the smell of Irlanda's hair.

Without any conversation, Qalian and I were guided along a narrow corridor with numerous closed doors. Despite the dim light that came forth from underneath them, they seemed oppressive to me, like holding cell doors. At the end of the corridor, Yaléna opened another door.

The room in front of us was impressive. It was decorated with fine furniture and pillows, and a chandelier at the ceiling emitted soft orange light. There was a haze in the air, and as I was looking over the low tables that were surrounded by hassocks, I realized where the scent of lavender came from. Altogether, there were seats for about two dozen people, but except for us, the door guard and Yaléna only three other guests sat separately at the tables, drinking wine and smoking water pipes. Soothing harp music came from a corner of the room that was hidden from my view. I started to feel more comfortable again. Maybe this was indeed just a smokers tavern? *Perhaps an exclusive place for even more exclusive customers.* Why the exclusive customers should take the troublesome way through the alleys just to smoke a few pipes of Peaceweed with a lavender scent, I could not tell. I pursed my lips and looked helplessly at Qalian. He only smiled contentedly and slightly nodded towards me.

"Have a seat", Yaléna said, and she pointed at an empty table in a corner. Then she silently moved away behind a curtain, and the door guard went back to the entrance.

I wanted to say something, but Qalian indicated me to wait. We sat down. Furtively, I looked around and mustered the other guests. Two men, one of them young, the other one old, and an old woman who wore her hair in a bun. Judging by their clothes, they all were wealthy, like ourselves. None of them took notice of us. Qalian took one of the candles on our table and held it underneath the pot of the water pipe. Then he leaned back — our pillows lay next to a wall — and yawned cheerfully. He observed the water pipe with a merry and relaxed gaze. In the pot, bubbles began to emerge slowly. For a while, I did the same as him; then I decided to break the silence.

"Qalian …"

He cut off my words with a gesture and shook his head, almost leniently. "Just relax, my friend." With one hand, he touched the pot of the water pipe. "Relax."

We waited more than thirty minutes before a chubby man with a friendly smile approached us. He introduced himself as Konthis.

The first thing I noticed was that the left sleeve of his expensive looking, burgundy garment hung limply down. He was one-armed. As he put out his right hand in greeting, I noticed several shimmering rings on his meaty fingers. A surprisingly pleasant smell reached my nose, originating from his perfume. It was spicy and sweet.

"Please excuse the delay", he started the conversation with a dark, bassy voice that did not match his appearance. "We have many customers today. May I have a seat?"

Qalian answered in the affirmative to the pleasantry, and Konthis sat down opposite to us. For a while, none of us said anything, and I felt how Konthis's dark, perceptive eyes mustered me. Then he nodded contentedly.

"Well then. Formailities first." He took a folded parchment out of his garment, opened it and studied it shortly.

"Jarimôn Bathila, 46 winters old, merchant. And … ah, you come from Arazeal? Gosh! May I say that your Endralean is very good!"

The question seemed to refer to Qalian. He smiled.

"Skill comes with practice, I guess."

Konthis nodded. "Indeed, it does. And then there is … Jaél Thalas. Arazealan as well."

I nodded and tried to smile as charmingly as Qalian.

"Very well." He folded the parchment again and leaned slightly forward. "Then we begin. Agreed?"

Qalian blew out the smoke upwards from a corner of his mouth. Like all consumers of Peaceweed, he had slightly misty eyes, but he nevertheless seemed to have a clear mind.

"Please", he replied.

"For completeness, let me once again explain the rules and the procedure of your visit, which will hopefully not be your last." His voice was friendly, but I could sense a certain sharpness in it. "As soon as you have paid the rest, a servant will …"

"We have to pay before we receive the services?" Qalian seemed to be indignant.

"Thus are the rules, Matris. I am sorry", Konthis replied without lowering his gaze.

Qalian looked sourly at the burly man, yet he made an affirmative gesture.

Konthis smiled. "Well now, a servant will give you a sign and then accompany you to your chambers." He looked at the parchment again. "Or rather, your chamber. The girls will be waiting there. Whatever happens next will be up to you."

The girls? A shudder went down my spine, and I gave Qalian a nervous gaze.

Konthis had noticed my gaze. "Are you well, Matris?", he asked.

Before I could answer, Qalian spoke: "He is just a little excited." He looked at me reprovingly. "It is his first time."

Konthis frowned. “Well, I understand.”

“As soon as you are done, ring the bell on the nightstand, wait a few moments, then ring again, and someone will take care about …” — he seemed to struggle for a word — “… the rest. And that would be it.” He let his gaze wander between Qalian and me. “Are there any more questions from your side?"” Qalian had a question: “I assume we will leave this place the same way we came in?”

“Yes. Yaléna will accompany you outside.”

My comrade muttered sullenly. “I see. And you can guarantee for our … anonymity?”

Konthis gave a short laugh. “We can guarantee that nobody except for our attendants will have seen you arrive and leave this place. And you can be certain that our other guests have no interest in talking about your presence. I think I do not need to explain why.”

Qalian shortly rubbed his chin with his thumb and index finger. He seemed to think. Then he nodded and put out his strong hand to Konthis.

“Accepted. We have a deal.”

Konthis smiled happily. First, he shook Qalian's hand, then mine. His handshake was strong and firm. Afterwards, Qalian took a small, bulging purse from his coat and emptied it on the table.

“Fifteen gold coins. You can count if you like.”

My eyes widened. *Fifteen gold coins?!* What a fortune! One gold coin was worth one thousand pennies! *One thousand pennies* ... Enough to buy a decent house or a warhorse of the finest breed. My head was spinning as I thought of the things one could purchase for a sum fifteen times higher than that. Yet Qalian kept a straight face while he was looking at the shimmering gold. Did these riches come from the treasuries of Qalian's mysterious “brothers and sisters”? They probably did. I uneasily turned my gaze from the coins and looked at our host, who was looking at them contentedly.

“It will not be necessary.” He waved his hand and a lanky boy who wore a red garment came in from between two curtains. His head was bowed in humility. As he had reached our table, Konthis only pointed towards the coins. He collected them swiftly and silently and carried them away. After he had disappeared behind the curtains, Konthis spoke again.

“Well then. Indulge yourselves!”

Qalian smiled and blew out a cloud of smoke. “Thank you.”

Without further words, Konthis stood up and left. After only five minutes the curtains opened again and the slim boy indicated us to follow him. Qalian nodded shortly and took a last draw on the pipe. I noticed uneasily that he had almost smoked two full pots of Peaceweed; an amount that could put a cocky, unexperienced bachelor to a comatose slumber for several hours. Qalian, however, did not seem

to be tired. His eyes had a milky shimmer characteristic of Peaceweed consumers, and all his movements were calm, but also I saw the strange, intimidating glimmer in his eyes that I had noticed on that evening when he told me about the "nectar of sins".

We raised and walked through the room towards the boy. Even when we stood directly before him, he did not look up but still bowed his head towards the ground. He turned around, and we followed him to the long corridor that opened behind the curtains. Similar to the hallway which led from the entrance area to the parlor, every eight arm's lengths there were heavy steel doors at both sides. Each door had a number above its arch, written on a wickedly expensive-looking golden badge. We stopped in front of door number XVI. Silently, the boy removed a heavy key from from a large ring and thrust it into Qalian's hand. Then he bowed shortly, turned around and left. Qalian played with the key like a prestidigitator and then inserted it into the lock.

The door opened without noise.

The room was ample and luxurious. A chandelier emitted candlelight which was colored by a red paper screen. A pompous canopy bed stood in the middle, and the air strongly smelled of roses and lavender. Even before I noticed the two bound girls, a cold shudder went down my spine as I entered the room behind Qalian and the heavy door snapped shut. And before Qalian could inform me about the services this place provided, the pieces came together and formed a coherent, terrible whole. I looked around, overwhelmed. My gaze jumped between the different, unambiguous elements of room XVI. The bound girls on the bed, stark naked, their eyes undoubtedly clouded by a narcotic. The box on a small table, containing angular kernels, which I instantly identified as those of holly berries. Even a bakerwoman from Old Lower Aranath knew about their aphrodisiac effect. Finally, the utensils hanging on the walls.

"Do you like it?", Qalian asked. He had sat down on a sprawling arrangement of burgundy hassocks. He was barely an arm's length away from the bound girls on the bed, yet he did not look at them at all. In the corners of his mouth I still saw the smile that never seemed to cease. **We are going to have some fun.**

Monster, I thought, bewildered. Without a word I attacked Qalian. With a loud cry I jumped forward, launched myself on him and started to strangle him. Qalian seemed not to have expected it, and for a moment I thought I had the upper hand. Then, however, he started to laugh — or he tried to. The result was a choking rattle. Full of rage, I increased the pressure, while my face turned into a hateful grimace. But Qalian just kept on laughing. His eyes were gleaming of joy and amusement. If I had watched the scene without being part of it myself I probably would have considered it a fake, an exhibition fight. He made no effort to free himself from my grasp. *You miserable bastard! You damned piece of dirt!* I pressed harder. I felt the stubbles of Qalian's beard pricking my fingers as I squeezed his

warm flesh. Yet nothing happened. Qalian still laughed, and only after sixty seconds I realized that any normal human being should have been unconscious by now. Yet it did not happen. Nothing happened at all. After a while Qalian's laughter broke off, but not because I had killed him. His face, which had not even turned red, began to show the expression of blissful serenity again. Suddenly I felt helpless and ridiculous. I had never seen Qalian fight, but since the day we had met, I had felt the aura of power which surrounded him like a veil of heat surrounded an open fire. He was dangerous. I took fright. *He could kill me* shot through my head. Once, twice, again and again, like a gloomy drum roll. *He could kill me!*

"But I won't", Qalian said. His lips did not move a bit.

Then he put his right hand on my chest, and one second later I was thrown back as if a cannonball had hit me. I hit the stone floor hard and lost consciousness.

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 7: All the Dead Souls

I do not know how long I had been away from the world of the living; yet judging by the fact that Qalian's neck still showed imprints of my fingertips, it could only have been a few minutes. The first thing that I thought when I saw him kneeling over me was that my pathetic life was over. The second thing was that Qalian — who by some unholy magic had had enough breath for laughter even after one minute of being strangled — could have let me die a thousand deaths already. Yet he had not. Instead, he kneeled and held out his right hand towards me. Without further thought I took his hand and let him raise me up. Then, I noticed a change in the room: The fetters had been removed from the two girls. Now both girls lay side by side under a heavy woolen blanket. One of them had her eyes closed. The eyes of the other one were still wide open and stared at the wall with the same dead gaze with which she had mustered Qalian and me when we had entered the room.

"Fire Palm extract", Qalian said. "A droplet puts even a rabid boar to sleep." For a moment a hint of grief — or was it rage? — overshadowed his gaze. "They do not want the goods to be able to resist."

"The goods?", I replied after a long pause, more statement than question. All of a sudden I felt unbearably stupid.

"Yes."

I gulped. "Qalian, I …" — I made a tired, all-embracing gesture with my right hand. "I do not understand." I sounded broken and dull. "Not at all."

Qalian smirked.

Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and began to explain it all to me.

Thirty minutes later, which seemed like an eternity to me, Qalian rang the room's bell. The girls were still asleep in the wide bed, rigid and unmoving.

Qalian had given me a precious dagger before. It was of much higher quality and was easier to handle than my old iron blade. He had only nodded affirmatively in response to my insecure gaze, like a gleeman who encouraged his son before his first performance.

Now we both stood at the door, quietly. His eyes glowed, like on the evening when he had first told me about the fire. But this time, there also was something else in his gaze: anticipation.

Footsteps came closer, and I noticed how Qalian slightly bent his knees. There was a knocking at the door. Qalian rang the bell again, just as agreed upon with Konthis. The door opened slightly. **No one enters this world as a good or an evil being, despite what the Path wants to make you believe, Jaél. — At the day of our birth, our souls are nothing but empty pages, and we alone decide what will be written upon them.** Then, a head peeked through the crack of the door. A bearded man with large eyes and a bulbous nose. His eyes widened as Qalian rushed up to him. Unerringly and effortless he drove his dagger into the man's neck, up to the shaft. He broke down immediately. The sound of the man falling clumsily to the floor reminded me of the freshly pulped furs which my father had dropped on the wooden planks of our home. He uttered a protesting rattle. Qalian, on the contrary, looked as if he was frozen in place. His left eye jerked wildly rightwards, his right eye leftwards, and the corners of his mouth up and down. I remembered my first killing, the images, and the ecstasy. *The nectar of their sins*. Then he released himself from the paralysis, wiped a splatter of blood from his cheek and grinned at me. I had not moved one finger's length. … **We write upon them?**

A dark red puddle spread from underneath the dead man's back like the petals of an opening rose. Qalian turned away and left through the door. For a moment I staggered, and then I followed him. **Figuratively speaking, yes. Only we decide which way we go in our lives: the way of sin or the way of goodness. It is not easy to go the way of good, Jaél. For the temptation to be weak lurks at every corner. She wears the garments of greed, wrath and weak will. We call these the "demons".** Qalian put his hand on the steel door of the opposing room and stood still. **Each time we give in to them, we tread the path of sin a bit further.** His lips moved and murmured something that I could not understand. **The first times we can still escape them. The more we sin, however, the worse it gets. And eventually** — The steel door started to glow, and it emitted smoke, but Qalian did not remove his hand. — **they own us.** Heat and the smell of molten metal began to fill up the entire hallway. **These demons make Tyrants. They make slavers. They make assassins. They are everywhere, and they bear different names.** Then the door with the number XIII bent in its middle like a wet piece of paper that was held upright. Qalian took his hand away, kicked the door open, and entered. **Those who have devoted themselves completely to them we call the "corrupted". For this is what they are.**

On the edge of a large bed sat a man with an aristocratic, lean face. I recognized him; he had waited with us in the parlor. Before him kneeled a young boy whose age I did not want to guess. I spare you the details of the cruelty I had to witness. I was overwhelmed by the situation anyway, so I was not able to comprehend what was going on. I can only say that the sight of the man who had his mouth wide open in fright made my stomach tingle warmly. I felt how my heartbeat accelerated and my blood started to heat up in my veins. **They are the ones who are responsible for the evil in our world, the ones who are too weak to withstand the temptation, to resist the demons. It is because of them that there is war, suffering and death. We, Jaél, we are exceptional. For we were born with a destiny, and** — without hesitating for a second, Qalian went towards the bed, pushed the boy

aside with his boot and plunged his dagger slantingly into the man's neck — **the fire is running in our veins.** A fountain of blood shot up, and this time, death did not occur quietly.

The man emitted a terrible scream and clenched both hands at his wound. For a few seconds, Qalian looked at the scene and smiled. Then he grabbed the dying man and lifted him up with a force I would not have imagined despite Qalian's athletics. **The fire.'** ***The man's stertorous cries grew louder. Through Qalian's garment I could see how his upper arms tensed up. Then he squeezed. The blood flew down his sleeves like a torrent, and I felt a veil of heat forming around him.*** *We do not know why we of all people were chosen, or where the force that leads us stems from, but we know one thing: We are here to protect the world, and to cleanse it.* ***Against all logic I felt a euphoric joy when I saw the man die. My stomach tingled and my knees grew soft.*** *We judge him*, shot through my head. *We judge him for his sins!*

My fingers clenched the dagger. My breath was fast and panting. Every muscle of my body was prepared to act. The man's cries had become more quiet and breathy while Qalian's garment was now fully soaked with blood. For a moment I was nauseous and felt bile rising up to my mouth. *This is insanity! This is murder!*, a voice inside of me screamed, loud and clear, my old myself. But at the same time it was pathetic and weak, and it was wrong. **So … it is our task to … murder all of those who have given in to the demons?** For anyone who made use of the services of this place deserved to die. They did it at the expense of young, innocent souls who had the misfortune to be too poor, too insignificant — or simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. The owners of the brothel had kidnapped them, drugged them, and now offered them to those who were wealthy and ruthless enough to put their needs above ethics. *They were sinners. Seized by demons.* Alerted yells were audible from the hallway, and a few moments later there was the sound of steps. *They are coming … and they want to stop us.* The thought occurred to me with an almost indifferent serenity. I felt — I knew — that they would not have the hint of a chance. When the first person appeared at the door, Qalian released the man's neck. He did not cry anymore and collapsed quietly on the floor. **Not all of them … there are too many. But those whose death the fire orders.** Slowly and almost casually, Qalian turned towards me. The humanity I had seen in his eyes a few moments before was now entirely gone. **And this is the only reason for our existence, Jaél. We are the ones standing between mankind and its utter corruption, the depravity that solely results from man's weakness**. His face was soaked in blood. Red drops flew down his cheeks. Some of them got caught by his beard while others trickled from his chin like morning dew from the beads of red Malphas Flowers. The glow in his jet black eyes could not be denied even by the most pious, priestly part of my mind anymore. The image that I still have before my eyes even today had at its center one feature of the man that could have arisen from a mad god's mind: his grin. **And this is exactly why we are here, Jaél. These people have devoted themselves to sin. They are corrupted, and only their death is going to** — You probably have the insane face of the Evil Mage from the theater plays before your inner eye, but you are wrong. If it had not been for the blood, the dead body and the shivering boy, the smile could have been that of a

boy who was about to earn a penny in an honest manner. There was no sense of guilt in his face, no bloodlust; only bliss. Indeed … he looked at me as if his deed had been the most natural thing in the world. *And he was right*, I thought when I looked at him. *For what we had done and what we were about to do was righteous*. Every corner of this place was corrupted, and so were the people making use of its services. And here we were — to **purify their souls.**

A shrill cry interrupted my trance. I heard how a sword was being drawn from its scabbard, and when I turned around I saw the one who wielded it storm towards me. I was surprised that by no means I felt nervous or overwhelmed. In fact, it felt as if time stood still. Every move of the man, every twitch of his muscles, the up and down of his chest when he breathed I observed with a clarity I had never experienced before. I noticed how the grip of my hand hardened around the hilt of my dagger with almost stoical calmness. The fire swell, and the heat was growing inside of me. Then my legs moved in a way that I had not believed to be possible before. I braced my thighs and bent my knees lightly. At the same moment, an impulse went through my body and I leaped forward like a predator. I tensed up the muscles in my right shoulder and turned my hip to the right and forward, which made my straightened right arm thrust forward like the bolt of a Pyraean ballista. My dagger drove deeply into the man's heart. *I cleanse him*, shot through my head. A tingling exploded in my stomach and in my loins. The world stopped turning. I felt my spirit rise, far above, **far away from my body, into blackness, into the light, I am free, I see him, I see them, his deeds, his sins, brighter and brighter, I see them, I –**

– am one with his mind.

The man who I am killing stands before me, as a boy. We are in a dark alley, I hear screams. The boy kicks another child, again and again, until the child's face is but a shapeless lump. The body does not flinch anymore. The hand clutches a loaf of bread. **His first sin.**

Lightning flashes through my mind, and I find myself inside another memory.

This time he is a young man, sparsely bearded, but already scarred. He talks to another figure which is nodding approvingly. The right hand of the obsessed man grabs a knife and thrusts it deeply into the other's heart. Before his victim touches the ground, his left hand swiftly separates its purse from the belt. He runs away. **The demons are inside of him'*, I realize with lucid clarity.*** *He has allowed them to enter.*

Another flash.

The obsessed man stands before me as an adult. I look directly into his face, but he does not see me. I do not have to make any effort to notice the demons hiding behind the void of his eyes. They laugh maliciously, for they know about their triumph. **They own him**, I realize. **He is lost.** The man

prostrates and talks to a young streetwalker. With his right hand, he plays with a penny; he turns and flips it in front of her eyes like a prestidigitator on a fairground. I want to help her, want to tell her to run, but I can't. The girl agrees and starts to follow him. He knocks her down and drags her into a dark cellar. I recognize the building. My sight blurs, and I feel the connection waning. A flash, then darkness.

I see my mundane self, close to the body of the one I have killed. For a moment there is perfect silence. Nothing moves. No sound, no thought. I behold the man's face, distorted with pain, and a touch of melancholy sneaks into my thoughts. *He is a slave to his sins. He does not know what he does.*

But he had a choice. He could have chosen the righteous path, but he chose sin. He chose the **demons.** And they have devoured him. I look at my dagger, sticking deeply in his body. A fountain of blood emerges from the wound, but it stands still in the air, a piece of scarlet red, unmoving ice. There is no hope for him anymore, I realize.

I have saved him.

Then, with a loud thunder, I am back inside my physical body. The fire devours me like a storm devours a small boat on the sea. It fills my veins with ecstasy, with liquid lava, and I burn like the sun. A mad laughter emerges from my throat, my mouth moves manically; I flinch like under the command of an insane puppeteer. **I taste his sins!**, I realize, and the thought heavily amplifies my excitement.

Then the rapture fades away, as fast as it had risen.

Even though it was a strong experience, this act of killing had not been half as intense as the first one. The reason seemed obvious to me: While the sins of the brute that I killed in the Red Ox had been a rapid stream, the sins of the guard were but a trickle. I blink to remove the red veil on my eyes. I look in the man's face. His head leans on my shoulder, and my left hand rests on his back as if I was comforting a friend. He gives me a pleading look and rattles. Then his vital spirits fade away and he glides to the ground with a tired sigh.

It was not before the ruby red puddle reached my feet that I awoke from my trance. I was strangely moved, and my glance jumped between the dagger in my hands and the dead body. Only a hint of the tingling in my stomach was left. Everything had happened in a split second — the attack of the guard, my targeted thrust and the rapture. I looked at Qalian who still stood next to the dead man's body. He gave me a satisfied nod and wiped his dagger on the bedsheet. Then he approached the apathetic boy who was crouching at the wall. Even though his eyes were wide open, I noticed the same void that rested in the eyes of the two girls Qalian had "ordered" for us. My comrade kneeled before the boy, put his bloody hand on his shoulder and whispered something to him. When the boy looked at him uncomprehendingly, Qalian repeated his words with a fuller voice. Then the boy nodded and crawled underneath the bed.

“You're keeping up well”, Qalian said eventually.

I wanted to respond, but I failed. The aftertaste of the rapture was too powerful. Now I realized that my knees and hands were shaking.

My **brother** seemed to be amused by that. He shook his head leniently, stood up and peeked into the hallway.

“The other guards will come in dozens”, he said without a trace of uneasiness. If we had been robbers, murderers or brigands who had raided an inn for base motives, something like “get ready” or “stay close in the fight” would have followed. But he said nothing, for the silence that surrounded us like a veil of heat the flames told us all we needed to know. Indeed, the fire steered me, and with it inside me I was going to save all the dead souls that inhabited this place, visitors and operators alike. Konthis, Yaléna, the woman in the parlor. — They all had given in to the demons, and it did not matter if they had done so for all their life or just one time too often.

I nodded at Qalian. The words blazing at me from his eyes were unmistakable.

Fulfill your duty.

I remember only fragments of what happened during the next minutes — or hours? How many people did we kill? Two dozen? Three? I do not know anymore. Most of my memories concentrated on the rapture. The enemies fell under my thrusts like in the old legends of the Ash Peoples. I escaped their pitiful attempts of defense with ease, and before I realized myself what happened, my blade sunk deeply into their flesh and I savored their sins. I remember how I had looked in a mirror during the fight. My face was soaked in blood, my garment was red like a Qyranian sunrise, and my eyes glowed with mania that I only knew from fairy tales. I was not surprised by the fact that some of the guards tried to flee when they saw us. But it was in vain: None of the corrupted ones left the brothel alive.

One killing I remember particularly well: When we had arrived on the second floor, we surprised a man who tried to unlock a balcony door. As he noticed us, he fell on his knees and begged for mercy. Qalian grabbed the man at his collar and dragged him to an adjacent room. A Half-Aeterna of about 16 winters lay on the bed. She was stark naked, and her limbs were tied to the bedposts. The chains were so tight that bloody, blue calluses had formed at her wrists and ankles. With remarkable sobriety I noticed that the girl must once have been very pretty. Her hair was an ocean of brown, strong curls, and her face was of a delicate, fragile beauty as it could only be found with those of Aeterna blood. However, she had been disfigured. Deep wounds covered her back like furrows on a freshly-plowed field, numerous bruises were blooming on her thighs and arms. All injuries were fresh, indicating that she had been mistreated this very morning. Qalian grabbed the old man's neck and forced him to look at her while he whispered words into his ear. He broke out in tears, asked for mercy, spoke about his

family, the Path and the righteous way. I had to laugh. Facing death, everyone regretted their deeds — that became clear to me after my third killing. Even if we had wanted to forgive them, we would not have been able to. Whoever had sinned once would sin again; the demons would look to that.

That was what Qalian told the man, but he remained stubborn and undiscerning, assured that he would do repentance. Eventually, I ended the tragedy. In contrast to my previous killings which I had performed with my dagger, I instinctively reached for the cat of nine tails that the man had used to torture his slave. He struggled and winced, but Qalian gripped him tightly until I had strangled him. The taste of his sins was stale. Corruption. Fraud. He was a bad man, a bad father, and the act of torture he had performed today and which had cost him a considerable amount of gold had been the first of its kind. When he eventually collapsed in front of me, a beautifully embroidered leather purse fell out of his garment. Its content was distributed on the floor next to my blood-smeared boots. I was about to turn away when I noticed a shimmering, golden item — a brooch on which a bear's head was finely engraved. A family crest. Bewildered, I showed my finding to Qalian: we had killed a nobleman. What would the repercussions be for us? His answer was the one that he frequently gave me, regardless of the question: a smile.

Yaléna, the cold-eyed beauty, was the one who had defended herself in the best way. Instead of trying to escape like the others, she ambushed us in the hallway. The fight between her and Qalian lasted a good minute, but considering the easiness with which he blocked her attacks I assumed that he only let it happen for amusement. When the woman's concentration wavered for a split second, Qalian had already deeply driven his dagger into her abdomen. She broke down with a gasp, vainly trying to keep the dark blood from pouring out of the wound. She opened her mouth in an effort to say something, but she never got the chance to do so: With a massive, targeted blow he separated her head from her torso. For a moment, he squinted as his face was flooded with bliss, and the heat in the room increased to a degree that even I could barely stand.

Less than five minutes later Konthis uttered his final cry, too. As the others, he begged for mercy, vowed betterment, promised us gold and women. A moment later we had escaped from the shadows of the Undercity.

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 8: Masks

Three months passed by before Qalian considered me worthy of performing the ritual which made me a full-fledged Brother of the Black Libra. He asked if I really wanted to take the path now that I was aware of its true nature. The fact that I stayed was answer enough. After all, what else should I have done?

I had fled from an undefined fear, leaving my old life in order to find out where it came from. As absurd as it might sound to you — I had the feeling that I had found the right path in Qalian and the *Fire*. **We are born as servants of the Libra,** he told me one evening. **But it is up to us to recognize our determination.** He himself was the son of a nobleman, as he had confided to me. Although — unlike me — he remembered the first years of his life, he always had the vague feeling that he was destined to be someone different. In his mind, too, something was hidden that he was unable to explain, and he also had these fleeting moments in which this something crossed the threshold to his consciousness. His first cleansing was a crucial experience: An assassin was hired by a hostile family to seek revenge. She was disguised as a maid and had entered his rooms, but he saw through the disguise and defeated the hired murderer. The nectar of her sins was the first step for him.

He would not tell me which other obstacles had been waiting for him after this moment. I only knew that I was about to overcome one. I did not mind the uncertainty during the long wait. I learned a lot, and for the first time in my life I felt like someone special. How foolish all the people on the streets appeared to me! Full of ignorance they lived their ordinary lives, prayed to the gods and believed that abidance of the Path and godliness alone was enough to protect them from the abyss. Alas, how deluded they were! There was no higher power to free us from the responsibility to protect us from sin. We alone decided what we gave in to and when we acted weakly.

People do not want to carry responsibility for themselves, my friend, Qalian once told me. *They never did.*

More and more I began to view the world as a game board. The stars, nature, or gods foreign to us hat set the rules and now delightfully observed how mankind struggled to cope with it. Maybe they had the power to remove temptation and sin from the way of the world? I did not know. However, evil was not supposed to get the upper hand, and that was why we were who we were.

It was an elevating feeling to be a sighted man among the blind. So many times in my old life I had felt powerless, angry about how little justice I found in our world. How many times — even in my small village — I had seen a guilty, sinful man evading his just punishment because of status, prestige or gold, while a vagrant got thrown into the dungeon stealing a chicken. These events embittered me, but I thought this was simply the way of the world. The Black Libra, though, changed everything, and the

thought of being part of it filled me with triumph and euphoria in a way I was unable to comprehend. Was this the reason for my anxiety? That I, Jaél Tanner's Son, had always sensed my true destiny? To bring justice to the world?

Even now, after I have realized the insanity of the Libra, I cannot answer the question. I just know that it felt *right* back then.

In contrast to what you may think, we Brothers of the Libra did not choose our victims arbitrarily. When a corrupted was responsible for too many sins, the member chosen for the killing was informed about the "mission" in a letter. I never understood how these letters always found their way regardless of the locations and circumstances. They contained only two pieces of information: a drawing and a name. The rest — collecting further information and planning the assassination — was the chosen's task.

Before my trial, Qalian received four such letters, and I witnessed three of the killings.

You might wonder about the casualness of how I write about it, but as I said: There is almost no circumstance that the human mind will not adapt to. And I adapted to the cleansings. They were always justified, however cruel they appeared. All the people we killed were corrupted and had managed to evade justice with wealth or cunning. But they could not evade us. The Libra was older than Enderal, the Lightborn, maybe even the tides. Nobody knew which prince, god or shapeless entity pulled the strings, and nobody knew how the chosen ones were different from the common people.

Even if I had been able to, I'd never investigated the matter. I did not care why I had met Qalian and where the strange vision had its origin.

With the fire in my blood I was not just anyone anymore. I was special.

That was exactly what I felt when I sat next to Qalian in a carriage three moons later. The time had come, I had been told. I was worthy now.

Worthy ... I wanted to look out of the window, but I was reminded that the glass was veiled by black cloth. No beam of light entered the cabin, only a lantern at the ceiling emitted some light.

"You'll have to get used to this", Qalian said. "Even I don't know the locations of the bastions."

"Bastions?"

"The strongholds. Their temples. There's one on each continent, but nobody knows where they are."

I nodded. "If I were a spy, I'd be able to blow the cover."

"You wouldn't", Qalian responded. "The Black Libra can't be shattered, as much as a forbidden thought can't be erased. You can prohibit it by law, you can burn writings about it, but it will never

vanish. This trial is not about your loyalty", he continued. "If you weren't loyal, I would have killed you long ago."

"What is it about then?"

"About limits." He paused a moment, as if he was ordering his words. "You may believe that you have already crossed them, but you haven't. Deep inside" — he pointed between my eyes with his index finger — "they still exist."

"We who have fully committed ourselves to the Libra, we are different than other people, Jaél."

I nodded. "The fire."

"Yes, the fire. But don't be mistaken — you don't know all about it. You have been guided by its force, you feel its voice inside of you, and you have tasted the sins of the obsessed ones. However, this is only a part of what constitutes a true servant of the Libra."

My stomach itched as if the fire approved of Qalians words. His words resounded in my mind. I felt that there were still miles between me and my comrade — and mentor. Aside from the obvious — his skillful killing and his confidence — there was more that I was not able to explain. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was something in his *gaze*, something in the way he looked at the world. "Lucid" was the word that came to my mind.

"And what exactly is it?", I finally asked.

"Boundlessness", he replied. "Total commitment."

When he saw my confused face, he smiled. "It is what you have been searching for all your life without finding it. It is what we all strive for, but only few are destined to experience it." He leaned back and crossed his legs. "And you have the opportunity to be one of them."

I did not respond as I knew Qalian would not — *could not* — tell me more.

About an hour later we arrived. The mummed coachman, who had wordlessly picked us up in the evening, opened the door, holding a piece of black cloth in his right hand. I was unable to recognize anything other than the clear light of the stars outside. Qalian took the cloth with both hands.

"I am sorry, but this is necessary."

I realized what he was about to do and did not resist. The cloth slipped quietly over my head, and everything became pitch black. Then Qalian took my hand and guided me outside. I heard a crunching sound when I started to walk. *Snow.*

"Come", I heard my comrade's voice, and I felt a slight pull on my left arm.

I followed him.

After about half an hour I entered the Endralaean Bastion of the Libra for the first time. The echoes of our footsteps indicated that we had entered a kind of cave. A few moments later the sound of several other voices mingled with ours. I was told to sit down. My blindfold was removed, but I was ordered not to open my eyes before I heard the ring of a bell. "Watch closely", Qalian had whispered before the voices and footsteps faded away and a large door was shut.

Dutifully I kept my eyes closed. A bright ringing sounded.

I was in a large, round room with high walls and a dome-shaped ceiling which appeared to me like the interior of a chapel. It was empty except for numerous candlesticks with crimson flames and a symmetrical column of high and precisely spaced pillars leading to the other side. Only at second glance I noticed the paintings on the walls.

The painting was different to what I was used to from Endralaean temples. It did not depict saints or the twelve stages of the Pioneers' journey. It was divided into nine different pictures. I turned my head to the left to examine the picture next to me.

It showed an athletic man standing on an uneven stone road leading up a hill. He was naked except for a loincloth. The environment was barren and tundra-like, grandly lit by the bright and clear moonlight. The man had averted his gaze from the moon. He wore a simple steel mask. It has no ornamentation, only two narrow slits for the eyes, yet something about it fascinated me in a manner I was unable to describe. It appeared to be … impeccable. Every muscle of the man's body was tightened. He reached both his hands out to the sky, as if he was expecting a divine blessing. I stared at the picture for an endless moment. It emitted something that could be described as an aura, and it made me feel joy and anxiety. Only minutes later I noticed a small writing at the lower corner of the painting. I squinted my eyes to read it. *The Renascence.*

I kept my gaze on the picture for a few more moments, frowned and turned away. The painting was fascinating, but I had to perform a trial, even though I was not yet aware of its nature. So I turned my gaze ahead again and waited.

However, nothing happened. I started to feel uneasy. What was expected from me? I looked uncertainly behind me — the steel door was closed. *Maybe I am supposed to prove patience,* I tried to calm my thoughts. I lowered my gaze again and tried to meditate as Qalian had taught me. Five minutes passed. Ten. Nothing.

I felt my stomach rumble and called myself a fool because I had not eaten anything before our hasty departure. *Just stretching my legs — I'm sure nobody would mind.* My knees crackled as I stood up. My calves tickled from sitting still. Carefully and slowly I walked through the room, as if my observers would be

offended by any sudden movement. I hoped for deliverance from the uncertainty by a strange, mysterious voice or the appearance of another person.

It was in vain. Two hours passed, and not even a grain of dust seemed to have moved in the sacral hall. Only then I realized that nobody was going to show up. Whatever this trial was about, I was expected to act on my own. *But what was I supposed to do?* I was certain that the way to passing the test did not lead through the door behind me. So I tried to find a hidden clue in the room.

I started to feel helpless. What was this? Some test of my willpower? *Such a nonsense,* I though angrily. I suppressed the urge to walk back to the door and knock. *What are they going to do with those who did not pass the test?* I had an idea, but I was not eager to know more about it. *Qalian should have warned me*, I thought bitterly. *Or he should at least have* …

Watch closely.

I halted. Had it been a clue? But about what? The room was empty. But … *the paintings.* Of course — how could I have been so blind? I had regarded the pictures as mere decoration. How could the key to this trial be hidden in them?

Hastily I turned around and stopped in front of the picture right of the door. *If the paintings are connected and the left picture showing the man — The Renascence — is the last one, than this must be the first one.* I observed the painting with uncertainty. It also showed a man, naked, looking at the spectator. He wore a mask, like the man in the Renascence, and even though he was less athletic, he seemed to be the same person. The mask, however, was different. It was made from thin, skin-colored cloth, and it appeared to me rather like a second skin, tight and fissured like the skin of a dying old man. I averted my gaze with a feeling of disgust that I could not explain and examined the rest of the picture. At first I thought that the reflective surface on which the man stood was a floor of polished stone, but then I realized that it was still water. The area around the man was filled with wafts of mist, and only a few pine trees, drifting in the water in a surreal way, filled the scenery. *What is this supposed to mean?* For a moment I adored the painter's artful brush stroke. The pictures were made with oil paint, yet they seemed strangely alive. How many artists in the world had such an expertise? Not many, I guessed. There were letters on this picture as well. *The Limbus.* I frowned. Arcanists called the state of derangement after overstraining one's mental capacities the Limbus. I pondered about the word, shook my head and went to the second picture.

The pictures were skillfully interwoven with each other. The second picture emerged from the mist in the first painting and depicted the heaven from a bird's view. The clouds were like rising smoke, drowned in sanguine light by the pale red horizon. In the middle there was the silhouette of a man: he hung from the sky on silken threads, like a sun god's puppet, and his mouth was wide open, as if he uttered a cry. This picture was also titled enigmatically: *The Washing.* The name triggered a memory in me. Hadn't I read about a ritual with this name? *Yes* … I confirmed my own thought, *the nomadic journey*

of the Qyranians, when they head off to find the Red Mountain. Before they leave, they must perform a symbolic cleansing in one of their holy rivers, allegedly to discard their former self. A new beginning, so to say, a spiritual cleansing. Could this be the meaning of the picture?

I looked around quickly. I was still alone. The next picture, which was similarly interwoven with the one before, showed the naked man, covered with dirt and soaked in water, dragging himself to the coast, probably coming from the mist-shrouded sea. Its title was *The First Stone.* The sun shone on the man's body, and its light was also the foundation for the next picture, which aroused shame in me. It showed the stranded man, who now looked more athletic and well-fed than in the last picture, making love to a woman. His skin glazed, soaked in sweat, and splatters of blood sparkled on his chest. He wore a mask of cloth, beneath which a diabolical grin could be seen. The woman with whom the man had intercourse had turned her back to him. She was stylized in an unconventional way. Her long plaited hair flew down her back like a torrent of black pearls, and two horns emerged from her forehead. Her face was unrecognizable. The couple's environment resembled a butchery. Puddles of blood dazzled on the floor, and a corpse lay to the man's feet. I kneeled down and read the title of the picture: *The First Blaze.*

Only when I read the last word, it fell like scales from my eyes.

Yes, Jaél … *This is a development*, it shot through my head. **A transformation.**

I had no idea whether it was by chance or by design that the man in the first painting walked through layers of fog. But there was no doubt: It was me, before the vision had occurred to me, when I lived in the grey drabness which I called my home and was always aware that my life lagged behind my true determination — in "limbus". The "Washing" was nothing short of the vision that had torn me out of this life, the "First Stone" was my escape from Fogville. And the *"First Blaze"* — a cold shudder went down my spine — *was my first killing.*

I looked at the next picture. It showed the man, sitting in front of a withered fountain, inside a temple courtyard which was overgrown with tendrils. Instead of the cloth mask he now wore a mask of razor-thin metal, but his face was still visible underneath. At his side sat a woman with red fiery hair. The picture was titled *The Companion*, and I instantly understood its meaning. Even though Qalian was not a woman, and our first conversation did not take place in a beautiful ruin, it was without any doubt Qalian who saved me from the chaos which I experienced after my first encounter with the Fire. *For none of this is coincidental.*, Did Qalian know that I was a potential Brother, that the Fire was running through my veins? His curious gaze when I had entered the tavern suggested that this was the case. *If the previous paintings show my development, then the following ones might help me through this trial!*,

Quickened by the thought I continued the examination. I suspected what the next picture would show, and my expectations were fulfilled. Its title was *The Rain of Flames*,, and it showed the unknown man and the red-haired women on a battlefield. His mask now appeared to be more sturdy, and a gloomy

heaven, full of foreboding clouds and only perforated by three dying beams of sunlight added a cataclysmical atmosphere to the image. The man and the woman stood back to back. The woman's face expressed lust and pugnacity. Bodies, covered in blood, with asymmetrical and browless faces, were scattered across the ground. The image symbolized without any doubt the incident in the Undercity, Qalian's lecture. The next painting showed the women, stretching out her hand to the man. If I had not know the images before, I would probably have considered it gaudy. *The Time of Rest*,. My heart was pounding. The parallels between the pictures and my previous experiences had ended here. After the "Time of Rest", which in a way described my "apprenticeship" with Qalian, I had been taken to the trial. The solution to the riddle had to be in the next two wall paintings. My eyes grew heavy and I started to shiver slightly as I looked at the next picture that had been hidden in the shadows of the pillars. *The Present.*,

The man was inside a circular room. His face was still covered by a steel mask, but in the candlelight of the hall it was clearly visible that the metal was not *perfect.*, No … The man's face was still quite recognizable beneath, and it looked *weak.*, I felt a surge of disgust rising inside me that I could not explain. The naked man kneeled in the middle of the large hall, his sickly and elegiac face turned toward the ceiling of the painting, his arms weakly hanging down at his sides. His body was smooth and shining, his skin covered with brown stains. *What …?*

With the realization came panic.

I stared at the painting. At first I could not believe what my eyes saw. When I took a closer look my doubts were erased by the accurate brush marks. I had deceived myself with my first glance.

The stains covering the man's body were not brown, but red. They were not made of mud or grime, but of blood.

A horizontal cut had opened the man's throat, and blood flew down. Now I noticed the small item next to the left of him which had undoubtedly slipped from his faint hand — a dagger.

Instinctively I turned away my gaze and stepped back. *No*,, I thought. No. No further reflections were necessary to comprehend the painting's message. I was expected to kill myself.

It is hard to tell what I felt at that moment. I was most hesitant to strip myself naked like my oil-paint alter ego, but after a minute of pondering I did. I had to. By no means I wanted to kneel down in the middle of the room, like a believer expecting a blessing, but I did. Never in my life had I felt more anxiety. I lifted my dagger to my throat. My inner ear heard a disgusting, tearing sound, fueled by the memory of my first killing. No … no man in his right mind would have used the knife on himself, with shaking hands, closed eyes, his body drenched in cold sweat, his eyes closed like a child who tries to wake from a nightmare. However, a man in his right mind would not have followed the vision. A man in his right mind would have accepted the punishment in the stable, wandering off with a few bruises and ruptures. And no man in his right mind was chosen by the Black Libra.

I closed my eyes and clenched my shaking hand around the hilt of the weapon. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to wake up from this ludicrous nightmare, to let the cold steel fall to the ground, to stand up and escape, somehow …

Boundlessness …

I sliced.

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 9: The Rise

The first thing I felt was astonishment. I was not in pain, even though I clearly felt the cut at my throat. Instead, I felt a sober certainty. I had killed myself.

I closed my eyes and waited.

The pain exploded after exactly twenty-seven seconds. I tried to scream, but I only produced a choked rattle. I broke down and rolled to the side, my knees drawn to my chest like a freezing child.

After ninety-six seconds my field of vision had become a dirty, dark red colored glass pane, and my body was flagged. The red puddle underneath me had grown to man size, and I asked myself if the numerous animals that my foster father or his suppliers had killed in order to obtain their beautiful furs had felt the same. After one hundred and five seconds I felt how life melted away and a pleasant drowsiness emerged. How nice it would be to simply close the eyes and sleep, forever and ever, in peace and tranquility … After one hundred and fifty seconds I stopped counting.

And woke up.

The first change I noticed was one that was hard to describe. Even though the room around me was superficially the same, I felt that something was wrong, like as if a deformed man tried to hide his true face beneath a mask. The other change was of a physical nature, and I noticed it when I instinctively put my right hand on my chest. My heart was not beating anymore. I examined my neck in disbelief. The cut was still there, but the stream of blood had stopped. My sight was back to normal, my mind was clear. I noticed a third change when I looked around.

The drawings had come to life. The mist in "The Washing" swirled around. Lightning made of oil paint flashed at the horizon, fading to a milky grey after a moment. The man himself was levitating up and down like a forgotten corpse in the ocean. I was unable to understand what I saw, and my gaze passed "The First Stone" and "The First Blaze". *The same thing.* All paintings were moving. The sunrays from "The Time of Rest" blinded me, and thick blood flowed slowly from the neck of the man in the painting of the trial. For a moment nothing happened. Then, I heard a sound like cloth being torn, and at the same time all masked faces of the painted figures looked into my direction. They all stared at me, and even though their masks at least partly covered their eyes, I felt their gaze on me like a dark power. I should have felt fear, but instead the fire began sparkling and awakening inside of me. T*hey don't want to harm me,* it shot through my head. *They want to guide me.*

I watched how the figures left their paintings. Liquid paint trickled down from them. For a moment they stood still. Then they marched lock-step towards me. Their steps made no sound. Only the

trickling paint made a surreal sound that I'm unable to describe. With every step they made, the sparkling inside me intensified. They formed a circle around me and stood still. Then they all lifted their right hands and moved them to their faces. Slowly and firmly I watched the figures, eager not to miss any detail, and I felt changing emotions. I despised the thin man from "The Limbus". How weak he was, how pathetic. Hope arose in me when I looked at the man from "The First Blaze". The man from "The Renascence", the painting that I had studied first, I adored. He emitted dignity and power, such as I had never felt before. Nothing could penetrate the cold steel of his mask. He had crossed the *Limit*. He was perfect.

The fire now filled every part of my body, my arms, my legs, my chest and my loins. *You have chosen the right way,* I heard a whisper inside me. *Now let yourself go.*

I sighed, like a man who holds his lover in his arms after years of separation. Then I nodded to the oil figures.

They took off their masks, and I screamed.

[Here some pages were neatly cut from the original manuscript.]

… opened my eyes again. I was stark naked, lying on the warm stone floor of the hall, but I did not bleed anymore. At once my hand moved to my throat. The wound was gone, though the blood was still visible on my neck, my chest and the floor. Half relieved, half shocked, I opened my mouth and gasped for air. Then I lay down on the floor and stared at the ceiling. A warm, flaring feeling filled my body. I had passed the trial; I knew it as much as I knew that I was going to be haunted until the end of my days by what I had seen beneath the masks of my painted counterparts. A sound of disbelief, meant to be a laughter, left my throat.

I had made it. I had seen it.

And now I was a brother of the Libra.

A feeling of power rose inside of me as I thought this. This power was different from what the arcanists did when they let eventualities become the truth, or from what the shamans did when they connected to the ghost world with their singing. The magic of the Libra was different, pristine, *immaculate.*

I turned my head with an effort and looked at the paintings. The masked man was gone. I was not surprised.

When I stood up, I felt how a heavy tiredness had overcome me. I got dressed and picked up my dagger from the floor. The blood on its blade was still fresh. I looked at it for a long time. Then I wiped it clean at my trousers and put it into its sheath. A moment later I left the hall.

Oh how complete I felt that day.

My chronicle comes to an end, and I do not want to waste time with unnecessary narrations. Time runs faster than the ink on this paper dries, and I was greatly exhausted by the events of the last days. Reading the previous page filled me with anger. How inappropriate my descriptions were, how fragile my thoughts. I can merely hope that they will suffice.

Let me begin the final part with a correction: Contrary to the claims of some people I am no unprincipled murderer. Everything that I had written so far is truthful, no matter how bizarre it may sound. The Black Libra had chosen me, long before I knew about it. It had found me, had given me a taste of my destiny and had made me one of their own. If there was one thing the Libra was infallible about, it was this:

All of the people they killed were corrupted. They had sinned, were guilty of crimes, they were evil — name it whatever you like.

At first I assured myself about it before each killing. Later, the superficial proof I had was sufficient to me. Not once the Libra was wrong, however inconspicuous the target. They all were sinners.

So do not waste time wondering if my victims were innocent. For they were not. Rather ask yourselves: Was it right to kill them?

Back then I believed it was right. The teachings of the Libra guided me, and it was so simple: We have a choice. We decide whether we invite the demons by committing sins. **We decide to become corrupted.** We, the chosen of the Libra, punish those who are weak. Not all of them, but enough. Enough — so that the innocent ones are protected, so that fear enters the sinner's hearts, so that the world is preserved from ultimate corruption.

Today, I remember the pride that I felt when I faced Qalian and the others with a tired smile. Not many were present, maybe a dozen, maybe less. Nobody applauded or cheered, as it was unnecessary. The men and women who were present knew what I had seen and done.

Nevertheless, I was surprised when Qalian told me that it was about time to return to Ark. I briefly shook hands with those who also had the Fire within, and then I sat in the dark interior of the coach again, confused, exhausted, but full of pride. He did not answer my question on why we had to leave so soon.

Even today many structures of the Libra are a mystery to me, and each time I ponder about them I realize how little I knew. How should I? Not even six month later I betrayed the Libra, and it was naïve to believe that the survival of the trial was all that constitutes a carrier of the Fire. No … there was so much more. Hierarchies, rituals, stories … none of them I would ever get to know.

Everything happened quickly in Ark. Qalian taught me the art of swordfight and the importance of regular meditation. It was not before long that I felt its effects. Each morning I felt more awake and more powerful. I smiled about the people surrounding me, their clumsiness and inertia. Everything

around me seemed so clear! Only three days later Qalian gave me a sealed document in which I was ordered to kill in the name of the Libra for the first time. I would like to claim that I still remembered all of my victims, but I don't. The only memories that never fade are those of the nectar. The procedure was always the same: After receiving the victim's name, I started to research and fleshed out a plan. The Black Libra granted me all the resources I needed — gold, weapons, poison — when I asked for them in a letter that I gave to the concealed coachman. When I was alone with my victim, I killed it and consumed its memories. Then I covered my tracks. Many people admire my "perfidy" and my "cunning plans", as I was never caught. However, I don't think of myself as particularly intelligent or sly. I seemed to have a certain talent for killing, yet I made many mistakes that could have cost my life. I was protected by the Libra.

With each killing I successfully performed, Qalian disappeared more and more from my life. He was a mentor, and his duty was fulfilled. I regretted it at first and missed his presence, but then I started to enjoy the silence and the solitude. I had enough gold to fulfill all mundane wishes, and I was surprised how quickly wine and love for sale lost their taste to me. In the autumn of the year 6291, four months after my trial, I mostly spent my evenings alone in the room of an inn or walking through nature or the city. I took my time to observe people. How little attention I got. My inconspicuous, ugly appearance did not remind anyone of the illusionary conceptions of a hired killer: a tall and athletic man, with a hooded, concealed face and a malicious smile. I enjoyed the anonymity and the role I had to play. I considered myself a quiet wanderer and a servant of justice who wiped the corrupted ones from life like the summer wind withered leaves from the trees. My fate was not easy to bear — never again I'd be able to fulfill mundane dreams, never again I'd be able to truly love someone. Yet I was part of something without which our world had fallen into the abyss, rotten with sinful people.

The others were blinded. I saw.

I never could have guessed how soon everything was going to change.

The day started like any ordinary day. I woke up before sunrise after a dreamless sleep, and I felt pleasingly calm when I stood up. I had accommodated myself in a tavern near the city gates. The stir after my recent murder had already ceased, and nobody had asked me about my Path or my origin when I paid my room for three weeks in advance from a well-filled penny bag. My gaze wandered thoughtfully through the cozy room. It came to halt on an extinct fireplace.

I yawned and rubbed my eyes. *When will it happen again?* The snow lay high on the trees, but it started melting in the sun. *Soon there will be spring,* I thought, and I became melancholic. I imagined children running across blooming meadows, and the craftsmen of Ark gathering below the green oak trees in the tavern garden. For the first time after a long time I wished for company.

I meditated, ignited a fire and had a sparse meal. It was not before I left the room to have a walk that I noticed the paper with a red slipknot that lay under the gap of my door. I recognized it instantly: It

came from the Black Libra. With a joyful feeling of anticipation that I welcomed after my gloominess I went to my knees, took the parchment and opened it. I read it letter by letter and repeated it after I had finished. Then I threw it into the fire. When the document turned to ashes I was filled with an uneasiness that I can't explain until today. It was different from the dull anxiety from my past life that I had chased away and that, as I had noticed, always appeared when I questioned my own deeds — but it had the same color nevertheless. I ignored it, ignited a candle and sat down at the small wooden table at the window to come up with a plan.

Three days later I left the inn on a newly bought horse. Spring was closing in, but the days were still short, and I planned to return to Ark before darkness, which I did. I gave my horse to the stable-lad of the highly frequented tavern, threw him a penny and made my way to the taproom.

Back in my room I arranged the tools for the upcoming cleansing on the bed, like a cutler at his market stall. My target — a young man — was easy prey, I could feel it, and so I had free choice. I decided to take my long dagger that I had used to help Qalian in the brothel. Then I pondered my plan. A short time before midnight I left the "Dancing Nomad".

The night was starry and relatively warm. Melting snow fell down from the roofs with a dull noise. According to the document, I could find my target in a noble house of one of the most expensive streets in town. *It's always the rich who see themselves above everything,* I bitterly thought when I approached the door to the Noble Quarter. I showed my papers to the guards and they let me in with a nod. **If only they knew.** Not before long, I arrived at my destination. Like all houses in the Noble Quarter, it was impressive. It was surrounded by high walls, and a stone arch surrounded the gate. The portcullis was closed, but behind it, an alley leading to the entrance of the big house was visible. Two towers at the eastern and western side of the abode made it look like a castle. In my former life the thoughts of the costs of such a luxurious building would have brought me down to my knees, but now I only mustered it coldly. I could not see any guards, but a flickering light in the gatehouse indicated that it was occupied. *I had to count on that.* I walked around the estate twice. At the back it was protected by the King's Rock, at its side there were two other noble's houses. At the west side of the wall, just a few arm's lengths from where it merged with the rock, I found what I was searching for. **Finally.** My stomach tingled, and the ash began to glow.

The place that I had chosen for my plan was a nice bench at the shore of the Malphas River which rippled sublimely through the nocturnal scenery. From there I had a clear view through the gate to the estate of the sinner. It was cold, but I was not freezing. A grey-haired man and a young woman passed by and smiled to me. I smiled back.

Then the alley leading to the estate burst into flames with a loud thunder. A cold shudder went down my spine and my forehead began to sweat.

The reactions which I had counted on came quickly. First, the couple noticed the fire. The young woman uttered a shrill cry and clung herself to her lover. Shortly thereafter I heard the sound of boots on cobblestones coming closer. The scent of smoke filled the air, and I was unable to fight a silent smile. Then I, too, made a frightened face and ran away, in panic, as it seemed. But unlike the others I did not run away from the estate or towards it. I contentedly noticed that the doors were wide open. Two guards stepped outside. Another guard stepped out of the gatehouse, helplessly looking at the other guards and the burning trees that illuminated the night like torches on a funeral march. No one noticed that the fire did not spread. I had no intention to cause a large-scale fire as I did not want innocent people to get hurt. I was only interested in the man who was going to die tonight.

I freed my face from the fake panicking expression in the moment I entered the darkness of the side street next to the estate. I slowed down my pace and took an iron hook from my pocket.

I stopped at a part of the wall I had chosen for my plan. It was three times my height, but it was old and fissured. I checked for hollow parts and pulled myself up with the help of my hook. Then I lay flat on the top of the wall and analyzed the situation. The trees were still burning bright, and the porter had opened the gate. Just as I was looking down, two guards ran through the open gate, but they stopped and looked around helplessly. The porter shouted something at them which I couldn't understand. Four more people, most likely of the staff, had left the building and joined the two guards. **Perfect.** I slipped down the wall and hid behind a bush. Now was the time.

I closed my eyes again and listened to the blaze inside of me. It was content, and felt, just like myself, the nearing nectar. “Soon”, I murmured. Then I turned my gaze at the hedge that had been planted directly in front of the house. I felt a greedy, affirmative tingling. I tensed my muscles and felt it shooting up my body, through my ribs, my neck and my skull, out of my eyes. I gasped and reeled for a moment. For a moment nothing happened. Then the hedges began to burn.

I sighed and smiled, as if I were congratulating myself. If the hedges had started to burn as suddenly as the trees, a trained eye could have noticed the magic behind the events. It still seemed unusual, but not like witchcraft.

A young man was the first one to notice the apparent spreading of the fire. He reacted with a quite unmanly cry. In the meantime, some guards had approached. They were pulling a fire cart behind them — one of the Starling inventions that I never learned to understand. By constantly turning a crank it could be used to shoot a straight beam of water from a bronze barrel of water. Its appearance made me hurry up. The inhabitants who had been indecisive before now fled along the brightly burning alley toward the gate. I rushed silently to the side of the house and pressed myself against the wall. I looked for a delivery door at the back of the house. Every big estate had one of these so that sacks of flour, meat and vegetables for the kitchen didn't have to be carried through the front door. While I was sneaking along the wall, I heard how the water from the fire cart fizzled into the cold night. *I need to hurry up,* I thought, but without any of the nervousness or panic that I had felt in my earlier life. I put

my hand on the lock, conjured the fire and watched it melt away. Then I carefully opened the door and went inside. The storeroom smelled like salted meat, onions and alcohol, and after some time I had found a suitable hiding place between three chests.

I smiled, took a deep breath and extinguished the fire. It was only a matter of patience now.

I estimated that the time was three hours after midnight when I decided to begin. My plan was perfect. Everyone had acted just as I had foreseen — I knew it even though only a few noises told me what was happening.

As expected, the panic had cooled down when the fire slowly began to diminish. I smiled, imagining the faces of the guards when they realized that the flames on the treetops did not perish, no matter how much water they poured at them. *They could have tried to extinguish it until the Black Guardian awakes,* I thought. Only after my order the flames began to retreat, slow and reluctant like a wolf being forced to leave an animal it had killed on a clearing without savoring its meat. After three hours all the voices outside were gone. Then the door opened and closed several times, and after some angry shouts of a man — definitely my target — there was silence. *Without any doubt he would be looking for someone to blame tomorrow,* I thought bitterly. *And he would find someone.*

I brought the document before my mind's eye. Mitumial Dal'Joul, twenty-four winters old. *And a murderer.* Even though the records of the Black Libra claimed that the demons had taken possession of him only a few moons ago, they had caused more damage with him than with others in an entire lifetime. He had sinned three times, and each time he got away unatoned. Young Dal'Joul, whose father had died this year, was considered impulsive and irascible — traits that had gotten any young man of lower status into trouble soon. Yet his father, a wealthy clothier who, according to rumors, had simply earned his noble title by mercantile success, had used his contacts to protect him from any consequences. *It's a shame,* I thought. *Perhaps it hadn't been too late back then.* The first murder had been committed in late summer. He had strangled a room maiden in his chamber after abusing her. The murder was pinned on one of his servants. The second murder was committed, in the same manner, in a brothel. The body of a young whore was found in the sewers. The third murder was the result of a tavern brawl. Young Dal'Joul had an argument with the innkeeper whom he blamed to have insulted his dead father. In the middle of the conflict Mitumial drew a knife and stabbed the innkeeper in full sight of the guests. Even though he'd be called to testify to the Tribunal, the result was obvious. How easy it is to turn the world if a few witnesses' tongues can be oiled with gold. Maybe the Tribunal would sentence him sooner or later, after the demons in him had caused dozens of victims. *But that's something the Libra was going to prevent.* I stood up and began to move silently.

Nobody noticed me as I sneaked through the kitchen and the atrium, up the stairs, along the hallway, decorated with old, fine harnesses, toward the chamber of the man I intended to kill. As melting the

lock would have resulted in unpleasant smells, I took a lockpick from my pocket, tricked the mechanism and entered. Many times I ask myself what would have happened if I'd been more aware of my surroundings. Would I have noticed the detail that I painfully became aware of minutes later, with blood-soaked hands and a heart, tired yet racing as a result of the strange, revealing nectar? Maybe things would have taken a different course. Maybe not.

The weak light of a moonless sky shone upon the mournful scenery before me. A big, misplaced canopy bed with rumpled sheets stood at the front end of the room. Books that had fallen from shelves lay on the floor, and a scimitar, presumably intended as a piece of decoration, had been rammed into an expensive-looking table like in a tasteless still life. I wrinkled my nose and tried to imagine what the whore who was killed by the young nobleman had felt. Did she sense her destiny as she entered the room in which every corner, the empty bottles of wine and the carelessly tossed clothes screamed negligence? *Presumably she did.* I imagined how she tried to play down her uneasiness with a girlish giggle. I looked at the bed on which the demoniac slept. He panted clumsily, his legs were spread and his hands sprawled out like a squire. There he had taken what he wanted from the girl. Did he already start to strangle her then? Did she still try to stay calm? When did her screams of lust become real, fearful ones? I bit my lower lip and shook my head, trying to get rid of these unpleasant thoughts. I was going to know what had happened sufficiently enough, whether Dal'Joul wanted it or not. And I was going to **enjoy** it.

I drew my dagger form its sheath. It slipped out almost noiselessly, like a snake approaching its prey. I looked at my victim with a mixture of pity and contempt. Regardless of his twenty-four years Mitumial Dal'Joul had the tender features of a boy. A scarce beard grew on his chin and his cheeks were smooth. His naked chest was covered with red spots and his shoulders were small and lankly. To a certain extent he reminded me of my former self, except for the obtrusive smell of sweat and alcohol. "The demons are inside of you", I said unconsciously.

I open my leather bag and removed a black, thick cloth from it. Then I sat down next to him at the edge of the bed. In the shadows I probably looked like a mother singing her child to sleep. I laughed shortly to which Dal'Joul reacted with a protesting sigh, but he did not wake up. Then he rolled to the side, moved his knees to his chest and crossed his arms like a child. I shook my head. If I hadn't known about the fragile man's deeds I would have considered him a pitiable, spoiled noble's son. But he wasn't one of these. He had given himself to the demons, not just once, but many times, and others had to pay the price for his lack of willpower. Therefore the Black Libra had sentenced him to death. I took a moment to ponder about how the killing was going to feel like. Then I grabbed Dal'Joul's neck with my right hand, pressed his head against the pillow and pushed a gag in his mouth with my left hand.

The man opened his eyes at once. I tensed my muscles, expecting him to try to push me back. Yet nothing happened. I felt his almost scarily regular breath on my nose, as if he had expected to wake

up with a gag in his mouth. His grey-blue eyes were wide open, and he looked at me with horror. *With horror? Or … with resignation to fate?* I had planned to stab him at once in his chest with the dagger I had placed on my leg, quickly, without ado. Yet there was something in his eyes that irritated me, and I was unable to name it. For a moment we both remained in the strange position. Then Mitumial Dal'Joul, murderer of three innocent people, started to cry. What first was a shimmer on his reddened eyes soon filled the corners, and the tears began beading down his cheeks. A choked sobbing was audible through the gag. I looked at him in irritation. I was used to demoniacs starting to cry or begging for mercy when they were facing their punishment. But it was fear which I saw in my victim's eyes, and their tears were a result of the instinct of self-preservation. His sobbing, his look, his tears, however … something was different about them. They seemed … sad. Devastated. *What if he was innocent?*, it shot through my head. *What if the Libra was wrong?* Why, no. Even in the tavern at the Farmers Coast I had found two people who had been able to tell me about his deeds. To doubt the sentence of the Libra was betrayal. Betrayal of myself, of the Libra, **of your destiny.**

I tightened the grip around his neck. There was still no reaction. *He resigns. He knows that there is no rescue from his possession, and he gives in to his fate.* For a moment time seemed to stand still. Everything happened with an otherworldly clarity, as if there existed nothing except for me and the man I was about to kill. I thought I could **hear** the movement of his teary eyes in their sockets.

Do it. Fulfill your duty.

With a cry that could have been an expression of anger as well as of helplessness, I took my hand from the gag, grabbed my dagger and rammed it deeply into my victim's chest. His eyes widened, glowing with relief, which caused a wave of rage inside me. **Regret!,** it flashed in my mind full of anger. **Regret your weakness!** I removed the blade from his chest, hauled off and stabbed him again, this time a tiny bit underneath his larynx. I felt resistance and pushed harder. Now Mitumial Dal'Joul uttered a choked cry, but still he did not try to defend himself. Irritated, I extracted my dagger and stared at him. His head had sunk to the side, and the gag had fallen out of his mouth. It seemed that he wanted to say something, but only a rattle left his mouth. "Why?", I uttered, to him as well as to myself. "Why don't you regret?" He did not answer. The life slipped from his body, I could feel it. *His sins,* it shot through my head. *If I lose him now, I won't be able to see them.* For the last time, I lifted my blade and rammed it into his neck. This time, a fountain of blood spurted against me, but while the warm liquid on my skin usually caused a triumphant feeling in me, I did not feel anything. Then the fire seized me, and I plunged into the black.

The Butcher of Ark, Volume 10: The Fall

For a moment I saw nothing. Then my view cleared up and I felt how the fire filled my veins. With one eye I saw reality, how I sat at the edge of the bed, the bloodstained dagger still sticking in the body of my victim, weakly twitching in death agony. His vision was blurred and limited, equal to that of a man peeking through a keyhole into another room. Yet what I saw with the other eye was clearer. His thoughts. His memories.

I saw a corridor which was covered with red carpets. It was the corridor I had just passed to get to Mitumial's room. From his room I heard sobs. I took a step toward him and heard a voice from nowhere. It was hard, cold, and without love.

"You are useless." I felt that it belonged to Mitumial's father who had just died a short while ago.

I went along. The sobs grew louder and mingled with screams.

A jolt went through the spectral version of myself and threw me into another memory. I saw him, seventeen winters old, sitting at a large table covered with all sorts of dishes. He had lowered his head. At the other end of the table sat his father, whose face seemed familiar to me. A woman was sitting at his side whose eyes looked dreamily and impassively into the void.

"This world is no place for weaklings. Why don't you understand?"

"I do, father." Mitumial's voice was monotonous.

"Apparently you don't, or you would not behave like a damn fishwife."

The image turned black, and I was back in the hallway. The cries now began to multiply. I took one more step toward his room. One more. And another one. Then: a new memory. This time I saw Mitumial standing at a door, with his back turned toward it. He seemed to be listening. A man and a woman were shouting at each other behind the door, the man furiously and the woman pleadingly. The male voice belonged to Mitumial's father. Again and again the dull sound of an impact could be heard. I did not need to see the scene in order to understand it, and neither did Mitumial. His face was a grimace of disgust and anger. *He despised him for what he did to his mother. He despised him for his deeds.* I was back in the corridor, having arrived at the door to Mitumial's room. The fire burned greedily and glaringly in me, but the intoxicating feeling that it sent through my veins felt wrong. I was supposed to feel triumphant, but instead I felt … guilty. Empty. "No", I whispered. **He had killed. He had allowed the demons to enter him, and this was going to be his rightful punishment.**

The door in Mitumial's memory swung open and I entered. The room was similarly devastated as the one in which my actual self was standing at his dying body, but this time the scattered sheets and books and the overturned table were the silent witnesses of an outburst of fury. Anger. Or despair? Mitumial was crouching on his bed, beardless and clean, completely unlike the man in whose throat I had just driven a dagger. Tears dried on his cheeks, tears — *I knew it* — that his father had despised him for, calling him a girl. Now his eyes were dried and reddened, and they seemed to stare into nothingness. He was broken. *Why do I see this?* I understood nothing of what was happening around me. What I was supposed to see were his sins, the moments in which he had allowed the demons to enter. The moments in which he was weak and had chosen sin and greed instead of fortitude and virtue. The moments that had made him the monster **that he was!** Determinedly I walked toward him. A lightning struck with a crash, illuminating the image. Then it returned to normal, and nothing had changed.

Almost nothing. I was still in Mitumial's room, and in his head. But neither had the shelves been knocked over nor was he crouching on the bed. An open book lay on it. I knelt down and read. The ink on the first page was still fresh.

15th day of the Kraken, 6098 a. St.

Father says there is no place in the world for weaklings. But he is wrong. It took me a long time to realize this. But I feel the truth in my words while I write them down. First I hated him for his bad deeds; his shady dealings, his "trips" to the Undercity, the things he did to mother that without any doubt had contributed to her death. Why he only had injured me verbally instead of beating me is beyond me. Maybe because I was his son after all? I don't know.

What he was unable to understand though is this simple truth: He is the true weakling. Despite wealth, status and the honor of his Path he is not much more than a desperate child inside, trying to use his power in order to gain acceptance and esteem. How easy it is to fall for this kind of pattern when we are not aware of it. I am ashamed at the thought of the things I've done. Little things they were, my mind tries to justify, but only now I realized how close I was to get into the very same cycle of violence and self-loathing as my father. Why did I beat up the noble boy? Back then I said to myself: Because he had treated me disrespectfully. Today I know that I only wanted to prove to my father that I'm actually a strong man. And I'm sure — if I had not realized it, one thing would have led to another, and harmless bullying would have led to much worse behavior. Quickly I would have been exactly what I feared.

My mind is made up: I will change. And once I am the upright person I am striving to be, my father will realize the perfidy of his deeds.

I have it in me … and he has it as well. I believe it from the bottom of my heart.

Stunned, I stared at the open book in front of me.

He wanted to change.

Was it really possible? Were his intentions so noble? *But how?*, I thought. *He was obsessed!* And once the demons have lived inside a human for too long, there was no turning back. A luring uneasiness rose

inside of me, and with horror I realized that it was familiar to me. It was the feeling of being misguided which led me to leave Fogville, to betray my Path, and to join the Black Libra. And now it was back again.

I heard a dull sound behind me, like a body bag falling to the ground. It was Mitumial Dal'Joul. An older man who I identified as a servant of the house was standing in the doorway. Mitumial had fallen to the ground and had his face buried in his hands. The fire was raging wildly inside of me, but this time its intoxicating effect felt out of place, like an intruder.

"We came too late", I heard the servant say. He avoided the gaze of his master. "I am sorry." When he got no response, he turned around and left.

I felt how a jolt shot through my body. The fire had fed, it had seen the sins. Mitumial Dal'Joul was dying. The spectral world around me began to fade, slowly but consistently, like the ink on a letter in the rain. Irritated, I looked at the diary on the bed and then to the memory of the man whom I had judged. The man who had murdered three innocent people. **The man who had given in to sin.**

He had despised his father's actions. *He wanted to change himself and his father.*

Yet he had become a murderer. Why? What was the message brought to him by the servant?

A weak light began to glow inside of me, a shimmer of understanding. Who knows how things would have turned out if I had just closed my eyes in the last moment I had been in Mitumial's memory. But I watched. With a torturing slowness my eyes wandered from the clean marble floor to the shelves filled with ancient knowledge, and stopped above the opulent door frame which I had crossed to enter the room a few moments ago. A round shield in a golden frame was attached to the wall, painted with a crest. It showed a bear.

My memories of the moments after I woke up are as pale and blurry as those of my escape from Fogville. I clearly remember, however, that I stood up from the bed with slow, calm movements which an outside observer may have misunderstood as a sign of serenity, or, in light of the act I just had committed, as a sign of cold-bloodedness. Mitumial Dal'Joul was dead; I did not have to look at him anymore to know it. My heart pounded wildly in my chest, intoxicated by the nectar of his sins. Yet I felt cold. I do not remember my escape from the building anymore. When I approached the city gate, I could still smell the smoke of the fire I had set. The gate was closed, but there was light in the guardhouse. I had no idea how to explain to the guards why I wanted to leave the city at such a late hour, but I did not have to. In case of necessity, if it were the only way to gain distance, I would simply turn the gate and all guards into ash. Again I felt this paralyzing fear in my stomach. Only this time, there was no way out. I had been following a lie, from the beginning to the end. There were no demons taking possession of people. There were no sins, no corruption.

There were only cause and effect.

I myself had sealed young Dal'Joul's fate by killing his father. *He wanted to change.* My eyes were burning, my limbs were hurting. My thoughts were not in harmony with the Fire anymore. It felt the dissonance and punished me for it. **Go back,** I heard its voice speaking to me from the blaze, **go back and do what you are meant to do.** Yet I ignored it. My fist was firmly clenched around my dagger as I walked toward the gatehouse. I saw the shadow of a man flicker. The small building was separated from outsiders by bars. I swallowed, prepared myself for speaking. And I halted.

I knew the face that looked at me through the window, and I knew the smile luring on the lips. The man leaned back in the chair, he had his legs crossed and his arms behind his head.

"Where are you bound?", Qalian asked. He spoke like a man who runs into a good friend after a long night in the taverns. I did not need the *Fire* to realize what was going on inside my mentor's head. *He can feel it.*

I remained silent, unable to respond. The situation reminded me of my old self: secluded, with a heavy tongue and no life experience. Qalian also decided to remain silent so that we only looked at each other for a while. His body seemed to cast no shadow despite the bright candlelight in front of him, but maybe it was only a figment of my imagination.

Finally he broke the silence.

"I will not stop you. But they will come to get you."

I remained silent.

"We all were where you are now."

I was filled with a dull rage. "Were you?"

"Yes, my friend." He let his gaze wander, as in many of our conversations before. "We were."

"It is our fault, Qalian. It is not the fault of demons or sins. It is only our fault." A word was formed on my tongue. First there was a tickle, then there was a clear shape, and before I knew, I had spoken it.

"It is a cycle."

Qalian smiled like a master smiles at his student when he came to an understandable, but naïve conclusion. Then he shook his head.

"I will not stop you", he repeated.

One day you will make a decision. And I hope it will be the right one.

My hands were shaking, and my fear was overwhelming. I felt tears tickling behind my eyes. *It was all in vain.* I had believed to be special, to make the world better with my deeds, to find my destiny. But I had not found anything. I had joined a group of lunatics who made themselves judge over life and death with wild magic and unholy rituals.

"Open the gate." My voice was merely a whisper.

Qalian nodded, with a hinge of regret. He had expected my answer. Three draws of breath later the machinery of the gate began to move and it rattled upward. I turned around and left without looking at Qalian again.

"No one leaves the Black Libra", I heard his voice behind me. It was neither angry nor malicious, only sad.

"No one."

I disappeared into the dark of night.

My hand hurts. I feel that they come closer. I want to end it myself. I would like to claim that my reasons are emotions like guilt or a sense of honor, but it is a lie. Pure fear is driving me. Fear of what the Black Libra does to traitors.

The place where I began writing this transcript will be the place where I will leave this world. Was it fate that my life was going to end here? The fact that I am hiding in an old, abandoned trading post in the middle of a forest makes this conclusion likely. I was not aware of the irony of my fate before I woke up between these cold stone walls yesterday morning. I had wandered all night, and I remember the strange figure walking thirty arms lengths in front of me all time. I followed it. Shortly before I found the clearing, she turned toward me a last time and smiled at me. The adornment in her hair sounded like wind chimes from Kilé. Then she disappeared like she had never been there. I wish I had more meaningful words to end this transcript. But I don't. As I have mentioned before, it is meant to be an account, nothing more. An account of what made Jaél Tanner's Son, the nameless one, the Butcher of Ark.I am so tired that my eyes are filled with tears, and my hands are shaking in anticipation of what I am about to do. Several dozen people died by my blade, yet I am too cowardly when it comes to taking my own life.I have a final plea to you. To find simple explanations, my story will not only be twisted by the heralds and the Order, but also by the Black Libra. It was born in the shadows, and there it will remain. Nowhere will you find traces of its deeds, and with artfulness and perfidy it will cover the traces I am going to leave behind. Besides simple explanations — I was straying from my Path, I was a monster — there will be other assertions which will satisfy scholars and philosophers. Do not listen to them.

They are nothing but lies.

The Butcher of Ark: Epilogue

Letter of the Chronicler

Dear Turas,

I had to chuckle upon reading your latest letter. No, the Black Libra does not exist, and yes, I do consider your research on its machinations a waste of time.

Why, you ask me? It is very simple.

Jaél Tanner's Son was stark raving mad, up to the last sensible corner of his brain. He suffered from horrid delusions and nearly everything you have read on the previous pages is nonsense. Now I am well aware that this claim fits the book's closing statement only too well. But allow me to shed light on the life and deeds of the Butcher of Ark — on what truly happened — and you will see how what I say is infinitely more sensible than Tanner's Son's metaphysical ramblings on demons, the Black Libra and the fire.

Jaél Tanner's Son was born to a common carpenter and his companion in the year 6056 a. St. in a small village going by the name Northwind. Therefore, his true age at the beginning of the chronicle was thirty and two instead of twenty-eight. This also increases the age at which he was abandoned from two to four. Being of frail stature and small body size, his age seems to simply have been underestimated.

His natural father went by the name Samaél Chipblade and was an utterly violent and mentally challenged man. Both of these streaks — it pains me to say — have to be attributed to his deep-rooted religiousness. Obsessively punctual, he visited the local temple several times each day to pray, never missed even a single mass or sermon, and was able to recite all of the Path's 101 verses in their full length. Nothing was more important to him than to abide by the path and to love our lord; and these were his exact expectations from his fellow villagers — which, as you might be able to guess led to him living a very isolated life.

Though he usually followed the priest's sermons, he often thought their contents too shallow and Northwind's handling of pathlessness too lenient. When he did not pray, he worked, denying himself desires such as love-making, alcohol or even music. And so the village was surprised when rumors that Samaél would become a father began to circulate. Though he denied it, everyone knew who the mother was: a young wandering whore, often seen at his house in the past weeks. The public knowledge of the pregnancy put Samaél in a difficult situation — abandoning a pregnant woman and thus committing murder on babe and woman both, was a grave sin even if the woman concerned was of low status or

a whore — but more importantly, it did not in the least fit self-perception. So he picked the only option available to him: He married the woman — not older than twenty winters at the time — and five months later the young Jaél was born.

As one might imagine, he was not born under a lucky star. Though Samaél had always been slyly aggressive and quick-tempered according to the priest I interrogated, this aggression only increased with parenthood. The fear and horror recognizable in Chipblade's young companion had been almost graspable during the three-day-mass, he confessed. So things took their course and — as if he had not already done so — Samaél sealed himself and his "family" increasingly off from the outside world. By now you will have guessed what happened, dear Turas, so I will keep things short: Samaél Chipblade abused both his companion and his young son. What began with scolding looks and curses slowly turned to regular beatings with a birch.

This he of course merely did to "protect" his loved ones, as he confessed to the priest once. Both his companion and his boy were befallen by "demons", horrible demons whose only purpose it was to drive them from the right path, to taint them. "One cannot purge them forever", he had said to the priest, his voice shaking, "Because they always return, no matter what you do." No matter how devoted the prayers or how chaste one's thoughts. "They always return."

Why the priest didn't intervene? He did not fully suspect how bad things truly were. Corporal punishment for children and women is not unheard of, especially not among the rural populace, and the truth only dawned on him as, one morning, he watched the young woman go to the village's well. A gust of wind freed her from her veil and revealed an abundance of cuts, bumps and broken bones. Do you remember the Butcher's crow-like nose? It is a remnant of such an "exorcism".

There is little more to say of this sad period of his life, except for its tragic end. In an act of despair, Jaél's mother took her life, but only after she had crushed her husband's skull with a heavy hammer. The starved boy was found five days later in his parent's bed chamber, the empty eyes focused on the bloody altar of Malphas. To this day I do not know whether he had been present during the horrible deed or whether he had entered the room when both parents were already dead. He did not cry, spoke no word and his eyes had nothing in common with those of a four-year-old anymore.

When I asked why the boy had not been given to a family from the village, and with lowered eyes the priest confessed that no one was willing to take him in. A child that had already seen murder and violence at such a young age would undoubtedly bring misfortune on those near it, people said. And besides, times were hard and wheat rare. In the end, Jaél was dressed in a woolen blanket and the priest travelled with him to the Fog road and deposited him before a shrine — in the hopes that someone would take pity on the young boy. You already know of Gilmon, the tanner who would later raise him. He shared neither Samaél Chipblade's religious fervor nor his brutality, but, as you certainly concluded from the Butcher's writings, he gave everything to the boy except for an environment in which his scarred soul could heal.

As he turned eleven winters old, he began an apprenticeship with the local priest and came to oversee the temple of Fogville five years later. The villagers saw him as a silent, dutiful man with constantly uneasy expression; and it did indeed take three days before his disappearance following the Star Summer Night's feast was noted.

In the third chapter of his account, Jaél finally tells us of the events that transpired at the “Red Ox”, a small tavern not far from Ark where an essentially harmless act of revenge escalated into his first killing. In incredible detail he recounts the inebriating feelings that took hold of him during the murder, then turning his attention to his first encounter with Qalian, who accompanied him as a mentor and friend during the following moons and winters. Here, however, fact and fiction, truth and phantasy, begin to mix for the first time. The innkeeper of the Red Ox might still remember a sad-looking, thin man being humiliated who then, together with the two riders, had disappeared early in the next morning. A man such as Qalian, however, had never been seen at the tavern. Now while this inconsistency might be attributed to the countless faces the innkeeper must have encountered since, the fact that both giants — Naratil and Jorah Dal'Karek, who indeed are quite nasty fellows — have been seen in Ark a few days later, both in perfect health, makes opposition pointless. No, you have not misread, Turas — both men who, according to the Butcher, died a bloody death that night are in fact well and alive and I have actually spoken to them during my inquiries.

I don't know what truly happened at the Red Ox, but I strongly suspect that at that evening, Jaél's inner need to take revenge for his humiliation caused his insanity to take root for the first time. He felt weak, and the violence he was subjected to unconsciously reminded him of the situations his father used to put him in.

But at the same time he was obviously lacking the power to do something against this — and at this point his imagination gained the upper hand and he conjured up a variant of the events that simply was never true. He then fled head over heels to the forest.

Now you may say that my claim — that the murders were a mere product of his imagination — is nothing more than conjecture. But let me first continue with my account and explain my underlying thesis later.

About six moons before the murders with a proven connection to Jaél Tanner's Son began, he claimed to have arrived in Ark. He posits to have found refuge in a tavern together with his mentor and his companions only to wipe out a sort of “child's brothel” in the Undercity the following day, together with Qalian. Again: The innkeeper of the “Dancing Nomad” recognized Jaél on a drawing, but was unable to remember a person fitting the description of Qalian. Even the brothel I mentioned had never existed in the form described, as my contacts in the Undercity have assured me of. “But is secrecy and covertness not the whole point of such an institution?” you might ask me now. Yes, dear Turas, it is, but such an establishment could only exist under the protection of a large organization such as the Rhalâta. And under these circumstances you can be assured that the destruction of such a — it pains

me to say — profitable source of income would not have been tolerated by the Rhalâta. No… Both of us know what that organization is capable of, and what they do with those acting against their authority. But what actually happened was that more and more homeless and sick people were found murdered in the Undercity's alleys, all of them barely recognizable from myriads of stabbing wounds — Tanner's Son's thumbprint.

The first moments of both Jaél's narrative and the truth aligning occurred three months later and coincide with the passing of the so-called "exam". Back then, the first corpses were discovered, and here we begin to talk of the "Butcher of Ark" due to the brutal manner of the victim's death. The following year, during which Jaél caused havoc in Ark, managing to escape first the guard and later the holy order itself due to his perfidious intelligence, a total of two dozen murders were committed where the Butcher's involvement is beyond doubt; and another dozen where it cannot be ruled out. A second person was never involved, and not all of his victims had been guilty of crimes.

You probably ask yourself the same question as in the beginning of this letter: Why the deviations? Why invent a mysterious secret society with the aim to keep evil in check? Why the talk of a "nectar of sin" enabling the murderer to enter the memories of his victim to be rewarded with sexual ecstasy?

I for my part have found a solution to this riddle, and it rests on my conviction that very few of this world's murderers and criminals view themselves as bad, instead believing to do the right thing. We are so good at creating models of thought that help us in reconciling our deeds with our self-perception. This was no different with Jaél Tanner's Son, and the essence of what caused him to commit his crimes is deeply rooted in his childhood.

You can surely imagine that his childhood had profound effects on Jaél Tanner's Son. I am certain that, on an unconscious level, Jaél knew what his father did unto him, and that he hated him with passion. You also know that children cannot yet distinguish between themselves and their environment, especially in early years. I suspect that this was the case with Jaé, too. The more he hated his father, the more he hated himself, blamed himself for the pain endured by his mother and him. Father had said it, hadn't he? "I only want to protect you. It's the demons, always the demons; you always allow them back into your hearts." Again and again the boy failed in this, again and again. And again and again he and his mother had to pay dearly for it. How he wished for peace, his father's love, for harmony. But he would never receive it, for when the demons possessed his mother one last time, they robbed him of the only two people he had ever known.

Unable to even try to process his experiences, the horrible images, the raw hate, the guilt and a biting accusation, a deep-rooted realization were confined in a mental casket that his child's mind buried deep in his subconscious, so he would feel nothing but a diffuse, omnipresent fear that kept him from ever experiencing something like true happiness.

Until the day of his trauma, when he was confronted with his repressed memories for the first time by seeing his own corpse. I am sure that finding his own rotting corpse represented the part of him that had been repressed and locked away, sleeping all these years. Now, however, it's burdening presence had become too strong to ignore any longer. He would die if he did not learn to understand, calm or heal it; and so he fled head over heels out of his life, his only compass being an impalpable feeling that would lead to his death, much like the flame is to the moth. It punished him with an insufferable fear when he acted against it; and it rewarded him with maniacal ecstasis when he did something "right". Without that feeling, he would have never left his village, never began to kill for his imaginary construct of the "Black Libra", indeed, without it he would have never become the "Butcher of Ark", instead ending his peaceful if a bit sad existence as priest of Fogville. He dubbed this feeling "fire". I call it searching for forgiveness.

With every decision, with every murder, every step he took, he wanted only one thing: to triumph where he failed before. To finally achieve the peace he had always hoped for. He wanted to cleanse the world of the demons that had caused so much suffering for his family — his father had, after all, had only wanted to protect his family of them. Can you follow? The demons, the Fire, the Black Libra — it was all nothing more than his subconscious desire for absolution! Absolution for a crime he never committed! The demons Jaél saw in his victims were nothing more than projections of the guilt he felt for the deaths of his parents, and by murdering he tried to atone for it.

Maybe my thesis seems absurd to you at first glance — but think of all the parallels between Jaél's account and his past! The likely most obvious would be his choice of words — "sinner", "demon" and "soul cleanser". Humanity is weak and rotten, but there is a hidden order protecting it from its downfall. What could this be, if not a reconstruction of his familial background! It continues with the imaginary person of "Qalian". Is he not an idealized incarnation of what Jaél would have wanted to be? Strong, lawless, full of desire to life and absolutely devoted to the Black Libra, without the doubts Jaél had until the end and that would ultimately be the cause of the last parallel to his childhood — his failure. Though dozens had to give their life because of Tanner's Son's mad quest for forgiveness it ended with the same cognition it had ended for the small boy in the past. But no matter the self-sacrifice — at the end he had been too weak. His will, his scrupulousness, his belief in the correctness of his cause — it was to no avail. He had failed — and left this world as a broken man.

You seem dear Turas: The parallels are too obvious to be merely accidental. I have been unable decipher merely two symbols in his story: The veiled woman appearing in his vision and the admission ritual. I do have my theories, but they are vague still.

You can calmly lean backwards, though: The day a wild mage enters your room to kill you and then digest your sins — I am sure they are countless! — will not arrive. The Black Libra does not exist, and neither does the fire or "Qalian".

To me the story of the “Butcher of Ark” is primarily the sad testimony of a man who took countless innocent lives on his quest for forgiveness. Who, in the end, is to blame? He? His father? And if you chose the latter, how can you know whether Samaél Chipblade with his sick religiosity and his "purges", too, has been merely trying to heal a scar on his soul, a scar on his soul he also had no fault in creating?

Here, Jaél Tanner's Son was right: It is an eternal chain of cause and effect. A cycle.

And nowhere in it will you find someone to blame.

Carolyl Dal'Gamar, Arcanist of the Third Sigil and Chronicler of the Holy Order

The Creed

The craft of vanishing

1st: The body is a chain which binds us to reality's ground.

2nd: You will ascent in a roundel of the transcendent masters who discern the one way you have to go.

3rd: You will find a window through which you can flee. Behind you will see a landscape so beautiful and so detached from worldly issues that you will start to cry.

4th: When she calls, you will obey. Her voice heralds the creed.

5th: The absolute dematerialization is our greatest purpose. The entering the secret cycle and the amending of the brittle pattern.

6th: You are free. You aren't bound to any rules. Do what you have to do and live how you want. All constraints are an obscure construct. There is neither good nor evil. We do not have to make those understand who do not understand.

7th: One day, we will receive the pronouncement of the masters. Until then, we will act in secret. The blind eyes of society will stay closed. But when they do not expect it, we will ascend to their gods and look at the faces of the almighty ones.

8th: Find your soul face. You are not who you are. Your mirror is a liar. Nothing shows your true self. Even you yourself don't know your true self. You aren't identical to yourself, yet.

9th: At the end of a long road you and your soul face will be one.

10th: Once you are there, you will vanish. Your trail will annihilate itself. And you will live in the roundel of the gods.

The Crystal Jellyfish - Its Physique And Use In Alchemy

by Dorian Sullevan

The crystal jellyfish, also called "grave jellyfish", whose natural habitats are the coral reefs of the Powder Sea, is interesting in many ways. The name comes from the unusual effect of its venom, which is excreted by its long crystal-colored tentacles. Nothing happens for the first few hours after a tangency which makes the jellyfish immensely dangerous, as the person concerned often does not becomes aware of the intoxication until the venom starts to unfold its devastating effects. - After three hours slight headaches set in and one feels a thirst not to satisfy. Afterward, complete loss of appetite, melancholy and notorious rage attacks will follow. But it is not until six hours after that it becomes really tremendous. The poisoned one now starts to age at a tearing pace. The skin becomes parchmenty, bones become brittle and eye-sight decreases. Healing magic or tinctures proved to be ineffective, so far. Except for a few persons being inexplicably immune to the effects of the venom, the contaminated one often dies by decrepitude after ten hours.

Fortunately, the crystal jellyfish can rarely be found even in the Powder Sea and is not aggressive by itself. But I, Dorian Sullevan, have found a way to capture a specimen of those jellyfish and chopped three of its tentacles. The potential resulting from this is immense. While the condensed serum of the tentacle mixed with nunscare as carrier substance gives a poison showing the devastating effects of an intoxication one hundred times faster, there is a way to work completely different wonders with this deadly serum. If the extract is mixed with pure pestled healing root and boiled at high heat for a few moments, it results in a sheer wonder-working potion, making diverse miracles possible. For instance, if the newly recovered potion is mixed with pure water, it shows a bluish shimmer and appears to take effect in a way that it wondrously conserves everything put into - even organic life.

I presume that swallowing the highly condensed serum would have a life-strengthening effect on the organism of the consumer, however, I am not quite sure about it.

But if the serum is rubbed onto a weapon, it almost magically appears to harden and likewise adds a blueish shimmer to the weapon. I did no experiments with this, so far but I presume that the serum will have a paralyzing effect on the victim being hit with such weapon.

However, the pure poison of the jellyfish which can be obtained by combining it with nunscare is second to none in potency. It seems to me that this way it even might be possible to kill the deadly self-regenerating black monitor lizards. If you believe the people, such a creature also can be found on my home continent, which meanwhile calls itself Enderal.

The Disciplines of Magic: Elementalism

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

The Elementalism

Elementalism is the most widespread of the magical disciplines and an art all of its own. Elementalists are able to manipulate the elements of fire, earth, water, and air.

Mechanics

In order to summon a fireball, the Elementalist makes an eventuality come true by substantially increasing the temperature of the air, which can then be hurled. Lightning, ice, and earth magics function similarly.

Since Elementalism does not siphon the spirit of the mage or other individuals and draws exclusively from the environment, its use is deemed relatively safe. Abuse can still lead to physical exhaustion, which might be more related to the carelessness of the mage than to the art itself. Elementalism spells all pack quite a punch, thus making this a very dangerous and offensive art.

Reputation

Elementalism is a prestigious school (and discipline), which is favored by soldiers and battle mages. Even though its use in the civilized world is not objected to, some of the godless people have a divided opinion: On one hand it is the only kind of magic known to the wild Arazealeans, who almost deify the shamans proficient in this magic, but on the other hand Skaraggs deem the manipulation of earth to be unholy and sacrilegious.

The Disciplines of Magic: Entropy

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

Entropy

Along with Psionics, Entropy is one of the most infamous of the magical disciplines and is part of the school of Sinistra. It is comprised of the manipulation of life and death, the conjuration of supernatural creatures, and the use of necromancy.

Mechanics

An entropic mage brings about eventualities which alter a being's life force. Thus he does not hesitate to revive deceased beings, imbuing them with artificial life and so deliberately turning them into Lost Ones — undead marionettes obeying his will. Furthermore, entropists understand how to conjure magical anomalies, ethereal creatures such as wolves, bears, or trolls, and elementals or weapons.

However, the most abominable and dangerous form of Entropy is necromancy. In this discipline, the conjurer is able to focus the energy of death and use it against his enemies. To understand this, the student of magic must be aware of the following: Death is an omnipresent power, inherent in every living being. It is present from the day of one's birth, although for the first two decades one's life force can withstand it; afterwards, however, it drains one's vitality little by little until it is spent. An entropician is capable of bringing death that exists in other realities into ours in a focused way. The result is a fearsome thunderstorm of lightning and fire, the sounds of which resemble the cries of the fallen ones.

Indeed, necromancy exceeds all other schools in terms of sheer destructiveness, but at the same time, the practice draws upon the mage's life force as well. It is not uncommon for entropists themselves to die through the excessive use of their magic.

Reputation

The use of Entropy is forbidden to Path-abiding arcanists and is punishable as a capital offense. The bone readers of the Skaragg — and rumor has it, some mercenaries from Melêe — are known for practicing it. While the motivation of the latter remains unknown, the Skaragg consider Entropy to be holy, which is no wonder considering their general barbarism and Pathlessness. Nevertheless, for reasons unknown, the bone readers seem to be more successful in bearing the physical consequences of its use.

Key elements of the Skaraggean Entropy include bones and body parts of the deceased, as well as diverse narcotics by which the bone readers believe they are able to establish contact with the dead. It is assumed that they believe the bones function as some sort of "focusing point." Of course, if these barbarians had any proper knowledge about magic, such ostentation would be absolutely unnecessary.

The Disciplines of Magic: Light Magic

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

Light Magic

The Magic of Light — subject to the school of Thaumaturgy — is perhaps the most prestigious of the arcane arts. Its arcanists are capable of curing wounds and diseases, as well as temporarily enhancing either their own or others' stamina and strength up to superhuman levels.

Mechanics

The manner in which Light Magic functions can be explained relatively quickly: Upon encountering a physical wound, the Light Mage searches the sea of eventualities for a reality containing an intact physique. Through immense mental exertion he then transplants said reality into ours: broken bones and muscle fibers join together once again, while newly grown tissue and skin close up any open wound.

An arcanist wishing to alter a human's natural attributes would proceed in a similar fashion. For a short period of time a man's strength and, by extension, his muscle fiber, is amplified drastically. Sustaining the necessary connection to the sea of eventualities, however, requires the utmost concentration throughout the effect's duration. Few Light mages have managed to establish a permanent connection.

Yet one would be incorrect to assume that the Magic of Light could cure any and all defects or diseases, considering how its application presupposes great magical skill; also, some diseases in their later stages, such as the meat-maggot plague, are too deeply intertwined with the patient's body to make complete replacement of the tissue possible. A similar case would be certain diseases affecting the human mind; numerous experiments have extensively documented the dangers of Light Magic when used to cure cerebral defects, ending either in the patient's sudden brain death or loss of sanity.

Reputation

Light Mages enjoy great popularity — especially among the common people.

For obvious reasons, Light Magic is, as has been mentioned previously, the most prestigious of the diverse magical disciplines. Its study demands the utmost dedication and reputedly coincides with a certain readiness to sacrifice oneself. To some, these requirements elevate talented Light mages to demigods. The Lightborn Erodan is known for his prowess in this school and it is not uncommon to hear pilgrims tell stories of wondrous healings upon visiting one of his shrines.

The Disciplines of Magic: Mentalism

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

Mentalism

Mentalism is a discipline of the school of Thaumaturgy. Mentalists are capable of creating physical barriers out of thin air, emitting telekinetic shockwaves, and manipulating objects with the power of their minds.

Mechanics

Similar to the the mages of the school of Elementalism, Mentalists focus their spells on their surroundings, and so their usage is relatively free from dangers. If a Mentalist, for instance, wants to push an object from ten feet away, they manifest the truth of an eventuality in which the object is hit and pushed by a random physical impulse. Protective spells — which one may simply refer to as "magical shields" — work in a similar manner. The arcanist channels an eventuality for either a brief moment or an extended period of time in which the air "hardens" around him in a spherical shape.

Mentalism becomes more complicated than Elementalism in the fact that the changes made in the world by the arcanist are not visible to the naked eye and are not permanent — unlike a fire spell's physical impact which remains even when the mage stops focusing on the possible eventualities. This is why the number of truly capable Mentalists is relatively low. However, their power grows considerably with increasing knowledge of their discipline.

Reputation

Even though Mentalism is a fairly unknown discipline throughout most countries within the civilized — and uncivilized — world, the Arazealean high priests are widely familiar with Mentalism. Almost every Mentalist who has reached a high level of proficiency in this discipline has studied the work of Arazealean Mentalist Asha He Tis or visited Silvercity personally to study there.

The Disciplines of Magic: Psionics

by Baledor Dal'Goldenstein

The Psionics

Psionics are subject to the school of Sinistra. Psionicists are skilled at manipulating other people's thoughts and feelings.

Mechanics

While schools like Mentalism — the respectable counterpart of Psionics — or Elementalism concentrate on altering the physical world, psionicists directly interfere with one's mind. By doing so they cause the eyes of their victims to accept different scenarios as truth in order to influence their state of mind. Once the spell is cast, the victim can no longer distinguish between the real and the fictional world; hence the affected person can be controlled like a puppet.

To give a tangible example: If a psionicist is standing in front of a group of three mercenaries who are threatening him, he is able to make one of them believe that his brothers-in-arms are monstrosities. Then, provided that the spell is successful, that mercenary will turn on his comrades.

Another, highly dangerous skill within the discipline of Psionics is the ability to make oneself invisible in the minds of one's enemies, using the aforementioned principle of mental manipulation. Psionicists simply let their enemies' eyes see a version of reality in which they are not there.

Reputation

Similar to Entropy which is also part of the school of Sinistra, psionics are one of the most notorious of the magical disciplines, the use of which is a punishable offense in the civilized world. Due to its inherent dangers the reason for this should be self-evident: the extensive number of renowned personalities and rulers who have fallen victim to psionic mages and have committed crimes while being under their spell.

The Golden House

Once, when Whisperwood was still called the Wood of a Thousand Leaves and the days on Enderal were young, there lived a woman and her companion in a trading post on the Sun Coast. They were both Manufacturers, the woman of the tailor's, the man of the goldsmith's Path. Together they lived in a humble cottage on the outskirts of a small town, each following their Path. But they were both unsatisfied by what their Path had to offer, and one day the man told his companion: "Why do we live in such a simple home, wear only linen and eat but bread and stew, while on our very doorstep ships unload the most luxuriant goods and the most costly delicacies day by day?" And the woman replied: "You speak truly, my mate. I too am tired of always looking at the riches of others and languishing for them. Alas, for us Malphas chose the Path of the Manufacturers, so we must be content with simple things. Even if I sew a delicate dress of Kilean silk, it is the rich merchants that will increase their Pennies, not I. An elaborate candlestand made by your hand will emblazon a Sublime's house with its golden glow, not ours."

For a long time, the man stood silently and gazed out of the window at the meagre garden where, in the midst of some diligently trimmed flowering plants, he and his companion grew vegetables and herbs. At length, he spoke: "Were we to trade with the outlanders directly, we could leave the guilds out of it entirely. At the blessing of our Path, did they forbid us from selling that which we manufacture ourselves? No, we will not leave our Path ... we merely broaden it, and thus all we accomplish shall surely please Malphas." The woman was shocked by those blasphemous words but remained silent. As her companion gathered their most prized pieces and left the house she merely nodded, seemingly lost in thought.

Late that night he returned with a purse bulging with Pennies. The woman emptied it onto the kitchen table with radiant eyes.

Soon the man returned from the outlander's ships with ever more Pennies and trade goods. Contented, he reported that the strangers had treated him with respect and liked to do business with him. For his companion he brought fabric both precious and rare, which she used to sew expensive dresses. For himself he traded valuable pearls and gems, which he crafted into marvellous jewellery. Thus after a few moons the Pennies had turned into heavy golden coins, and the man and his companion had gained the prosperity they had desired for so long.

One night, the woman told her companion: "Now our table is brimming with the sweetest fruits from the farthest lands and our rooms are richly adorned, but still we live in this meek old house. Our proficiency should provide us with an estate in the Nobles Quarter of Ark, but no matter how much

gold we amass, we are denied a life in such splendour." The man considered this and answered: "If the Sublime refuse us their manors, we shall put them all to shame with the splendour of our own house."

The following evening, the man returned home even later than usual. He did not lie down. Deep in the night, his companion thought she could hear strange noises, tapping and rasping somewhere in the house, but she did not dare to rise and see what they might portend.

As she entered the garden the following day, she found her companion in the herbal bed, fast asleep. She turned to look at the house and was stunned, for the front was utterly changed: All the window frames were embellished with golden inlays. The old door had been replaced by a grand double-leaf portal of strange, glossy opaque wood. Turning her head, she realised that the quaint wooden fence had been replaced by poles of shadowsteel, enwrought with veins of finest gold and crowned with sparkling gemstones. "This has to be wild magic," she breathed. But when her companion awoke and asked her if she liked the novel grandeur, tears welled in her eyes and she embraced him, lost for words. Still, at supper she cautiously asked how such a change was possible in but one night. "I have gained many a new friend in my recent dealings," he said smiling, and his companion left it at that, for through the garden window the new fence shone magnificently in the setting sun and eased her mind. During the moons that followed, there were many nights when the man did not come to bed. Always the woman woke to strange, hammering sounds, and always she stayed in bed, eager for the newest riches that would adorn her house come morning. Her fear had long since abated. They had a good life, finally enjoying the well-earned prosperity they could demonstrate as readily as the sublime lords and ladies. More and more gold graced their façade, and by then even the shingles on the roof were coated with precious metal. Elaborate marble statues lined the garden. A knocker with a huge, sparkling gem was mounted on the portal, and the garden path was framed by many shimmering stones. Every sundown, the whole garden was bathed in the golden light reverberating off the house.

"The people of the city seem to give our manor a wide berth," the woman remarked one day. "They just shake their heads and hurry by." Her companion gave a nod. "Yes, they begrudge us our affluence. Let them gossip as viciously as they like. It is the just fruit of our hard labour and nobody can deny us the position our Path has brought us to."

They had not spoken about their Path for a long time, and the woman cringed at the word. "Let us retire," she said. "It has been a long day."

Early next morning they woke to a babel of voices outside. A crowd had gathered in front of the golden house, led by three Keepers of the Order. Many held torches glittering dangerously in the dawning light. The man and his companion stood on the threshold and eyed the mob in wonder. "What do you want with us?" the woman cried.

"Listen to this," one of their neighbours said to a Keeper. "They cannot speak any more - it is just rasping and screeching. Nobody understands them. And look at them." Another chimed in: "Yes,

those huge, empty eyes and that dark, leathery skin. Moon after moon it has grown worse." The Keeper's gaze had darkened. "Indeed, it looks like a wicked, unknown disease. Or like wild magic." Close by, a woman moaned. "The stench is unbearable. How is it even possible to build something so dreadful?"

All the while, the man and his companion listened to the exclamations from the crowd. For unlike the two of them, the people saw not a magnificent manor but what really stood there: A vast, hulking structure of carcasses almost artfully woven into a mesh of bones and branches. The whole construction was coated with dark and unnatural slime, dropping to the ground in long, sluggish strands. Large femurs bound with strips of leather made up the fence. The many statues were sewn together from various animal corpses and the garden, once neatly trimmed, now inhabited by repugnant, sickly looking plants. Skulls lined the garden path leading up to the portal - a baleful maw gaping under a giant ribcage.

"Burn it down!" came a cry from the mob. It yanked the man and the woman from their stupor. Instinctively, they raised their hands in a protective gesture and brilliant white-blue lightning flashed from their fingertips. The Keepers of the Order were thrown back and sent a number of folk tumbling. In the ensuing turmoil, the first torches were thrown at the house which soon blazed brightly.

But the two inhabitants of that ghastly structure had used the short moment of bafflement and fled inside. Later, the Keepers sifting through the cold remnants of the house found a latch in the cellar. It opened into a vast cave system full of fungi and huge, prowling arachnids. After having searched in vain for many hours, they returned to the surface, their only discovery a couple of diaries. They had survived the fire unscathed and revealed to its full extent the delusion and denial under which the woman and her companion had perceived the actually harrowing metamorphosis of both the house and themselves.

"Alas, they are out in the world now," the first Keeper said. "Malphas protect us from their brood!" - "What shall we call them?" the second Keeper asked. "Perhaps they should be known by the rasping sounds they uttered. What did it sound like again?" And the third Keeper answered: "Something like: Arp ... Arp ..."

The Holy Order

The Holy Order, it protects and reigns, from the beginning of time until the present day, adamant and unbreakable. At its apex stands the sacred light-born Malphas. All along the Order has been the driving force of Enderal, in political as well as religious regard. Its roots go back to the opening of the land, when Vyn was still young and the bygone sea was still blue and pure. The eye, in which the snake resides, is watching over everything and everyone. Its keepers in red, its arcanists in white clad, are carrying its doctrines into the world. Being the highest institution in Enderal, the eternal, clear principles of the path lay to its feet, allocating its members a steady spot below the beneficent cloak of Malphas.

Directly under the divine Malphas is the post of the Grandmaster, owning the military decisional power of Enderal's troops. His area of access ranges over outposts across several continents. He too is revered, albeit not to such a high degree as Malphas in his divinity. With the post of the seneschal, his deputy and placeholder, the Grandmaster forms the Fourth and highest Signet of the Order. Below this pinnacle of power follows the Third Signet, where the hierarchy splits into two branches, the military and the arcane, represented by the Signet Leader and the Archmagister.

A new member of the Order starts its career as a novice. Generally, only pure-blooded Endraleans, often nobles, can be approved for an entrance examination as novice and in the subsequent years they have to proof themselves in a noviciate to be allowed to ascend into the First Signet. In exceptions, examinees that qualify through particular talents are acquainted with the Order. Being such a "chosen one", it is not easy to shine among the novices with higher reputation, but some cases proof that also these ones can come a long way. Every year an examination takes place, which puts the mind strength under a hectic trial. Only the most talented novices are entitled to participate and match against each other, which is why some have to wait a very long time for this opportunity. Out of the noviciate outgrows the First Signet. The army and the town watch are tightly interwoven into the hierarchy of the Order. Banner Masters in the Second Signet on the military path and commandants of the army stand on the same executional tier. Through this it is ensured that full control over the troops is maintained within the Order.

The clergy, impersonated by the high priest, by all means has influence in the Order, but is not incorporated into its organization. Like the troops, he is subordinate to the mighty circle of influence of the power of the Order as central organ and keeper of right, faith and regulation in Enderal.

Legal verdicts are rendered in the tribunal, an entity belonging to the Order that consists out of thirteen ambassadors of the populace. It is to be elected every five years from all layers of society.

The Legacy of the Pyreans

by Lexil Merrayil and Lishari Peghast

The most recent, very troubling events on all of Vyn and now also in Enderal make it necessary to gather the all too long just fragmentarily available and tightly guarded knowledge about the Pyreans. This manuscript shall be a starting point for further research and archeological projects for the chroniclers of the Holy Order and the mages of Nehrim, which are supporting you on the search for insight and answers.

The reign of the Pyreans ended as sudden as the trail they left on history, and very little is known about their culture. The former global empire, which the Pyreans established before the first age, was gigantic, an incredible big territory, proven by the scattering of their remains. The ruins are spread all across Vyn, yet they are especially bundled up on a continent, more so than on any other: On Enderal exists the highest number of discovered ruins. It is said that the "City of Thousand Floods" was located here, the biggest city ever built. There is no clear proof of its existence, and nobody knows, if such a big city could have been real. However, it is certain that different Pyrean subcultures originated from a main tribe, like on the continents of the present age.

Magic crystals, of which there must have been a great abundance in the past, were the source of light, heat and served as propulsion for their first machines. The energy-rich minerals allowed for complicated, technical constructions with solid efficiency to be built, of which the functionality still poses an unsolvable mystery for master builders to this day. How it was possible to supply the valuable energy into the crystals without losing it midway or if the crystals themselves were the hoard of power, it remains unclear. It is obvious that the Pyreans — in terms of magic — had a certain knowledge, with which they refined parts of their architecture. With the aid of the crystals they propelled the Undertrain, an invention, with which the people could travel a tunnel system, which was buried in the ground.

Despite the prohibition of exploration of the ruins, which was declared in Enderal, Arazeal and Qyra, there are some bold troves, that shed light on their culture, among them are the legendary stone tablets of the Ishyian, even though they were locked away from public eyes. Allegedly these writings contain ancient, thus far unrevealed secrets about the way the world could have looked before the first age.

The supreme authority of the Pyrean empire was the Highest Being. It was not a man or a woman, but rather a child, chosen from their ranks. The Pyreans believed, that the soul, which sustains and holds together the very universe itself, could be locked inside the child's body through a ritual. It resided

there until the chosen one reached a specific age. If the latter happened, a new soul vessel was needed — and the old vessel was disposed of in a bloody sacrifice.

The people followed the visions of the Highest Being blindly. From them originated the two ruling priestly castes of the Ishyian and Dylgar, since the empire Pyra was an aristocracy similar to Vyn under the Light-Born. On top of these castes three Sun Priests are elevated, who were reading the visions of the Highest Being, interpreting and deciphering them. It was them who held the actual power over Pyra, thanks to their knowledge about all that was happening and had yet to happen.

A special role was played by an older high priestess, who seemed to be standing even above the Sun Priests for several years. Her true name was never mentioned in the writings, instead therein she was called "Niri", which in the old language of the Pyreans means as much as "Mother". This woman is part of many records and statues. Undoubtedly she accomplished great things, even if it is unknown what it was that helped her achieve her fame.

As family association the two castes placed immense value on the purity of their blood. Nothing was more important than their own, untarnished lineage. Some myths, like those of Yurus and Mirani, suggest officially recognized amours between family members. One cannot rule out the possibility — quite the opposite — that incest was practiced to preserve this purity. There was never a real hostility between the two castes, yet they were highly ambitious and power-hungry, which peaked into a millennial lasting rivalry. Political intrigues and demonstrations of power were the result. The two different architectural styles of the Pyrean ruins developed through the rivalry of the castes, who tried to surpass each other with more and more magnificent and elaborate temple complexes.

There exist many theories about the puzzling disappearance and the with that associated downfall of the Pyreans, one absurder than the other. Researchers and historians have yet to get tired of developing new assumptions about the course of events to this phenomenon, however a handful of explanations is more plausible and stand out of the mass of balderdash.

One of the last-mentioned theories says that the castes of the Ishyian and Dylgar started a devastating war with each other and eventually perished because of it. It is still disputed which one of the two sides could have dug up the hatchet. For their mutual massacre and hate they were hit by the punishment by the gods and their people were doomed. Yet it is rumored, mostly in shady places, that this theory was created in pretence to serve political purposes. The conspirators which are saying these things might have their reasons, however of all the mentioned notions this one seems to be the most plausible explanation for the disappearance.

Other theories deal with the thought that a magic power of higher origin could have obliterated the Pyreans from the face of Vyn. This could also be a possibility, but the existence of a supernatural power, capable of annihilating whole peoples and being ill-affected towards life itself, has not yet been

proven beyond doubt. Therefore this theory seems to be solely based on the intention to put fear and disturbance into the hearts of the people, nothing more and nothing less.

The last explanatory approach brings up a cold-blooded assassin as reason, who murdered every member of both castes by the order of a secret organization to contain the power of the Pyreans and to possibly overthrow them. A brutal mass murder to restore the balance appears more believable than a magical cataclysm, however it is still just a speculation thus far as well.

These kind of explanations are as numerous as grains of sand on the beach, all of them are less like historical truths, but rather like tales, told to make people pleasantly shiver. It will probably forever be a mystery how this glorious culture found its sudden and deavastating end — the myth of the forgotten folk.

The Life of Torgan Whispertongue, Volume 1: Childhood

The man's lifeless body laid next to my feet. The faint light of the moon gleamed silvery and eerily in the deep red puddle underneath him.

An odd feeling of numbness hit me the moment in which the dark wafts of mist in my head dispersed. It somewhat equaled the paralysis one feels when standing in front of the love of one's life and being unable to move a single muscle, due to over-excitement. It's just that this numbness was more brutal, more ravenous, and all-consuming.

I vaguely remember how my view slowly wandered down my arm. In my hand I held a bloody, fist-sized stone. Pieces of what had been beaten out of that young man's head were still sticking to it. And once more a feeling of numbness hit me. In that moment I had lost all memories of what had transpired just a bit earlier. Certainly I've gotten my memory back by now, but even years after that event I was still searching for it futilely.

This man was dead, stone-dead, as dead as possible, even deader than a Lost One, though those creatures nonetheless walk the earth even in their state. There wasn't a soul in sight in the whole park. No oddity, considering the late hour. The weight of the bloody stone in my hands seemed to get heavier and heavier the more the horrifying truth entered my mind. Soon it was so heavy that I found it impossible to hold onto it. I had to let go of the stone. Was it possible? I was a murderer?

The facts supported no other conclusion, and although my reasoning was clouded greatly by the Glimmercapdust, I could still arrive at that conclusion in my delirium. I, Torgan Whispertongue, whose dream it once was to reach for the stars, to accomplish what nobody had ever done before, was a killer. I went too far, to the edge of the world and beyond it, inside the most shady ravines and recesses of Vyn. Following the numbness, a wave of pure panic struck me. They would pursue me. They would imprison me — or even worse, hang me. That would serve me right. I could go nowhere. My love, Maressa, my friends, everybody I knew turned away from me.

In hindsight I have to forgive the past me the misconduct he committed. Long before the murder, I had deviated from my right path. I had tried to reach for the stars, but had missed them and had fallen. The void I fell into stuck to me like an oppressive shadow. If a man forgets why he was born he loses his life's meaning. Much worse befell me after that incident, and it isn't easy to contemplate that now, years since I turned back to the one true and right path. My old bones never recovered from those dark times; however, I could leave those times behind me by writing them down.

Behold and see for yourself what transpired back then, with a righteous and observant eye.

Chapter 1

Childhood

My father was a man one couldn't often find throughout the world. For other children, worthy heroes or explorers were role models. For me it was my father, who was my best friend, my mentor, and even half my soul. He loved his little son with the fiery hair, his "spark." At times the books which he looked after were more important to him than the love of his wife, my mother Rochmea. But he never once neglected me. As a librarian he wasn't one of the wealthiest citizens of Ark, but he knew how to feed his family and had a way with saving money. He taught me the fine arts of reading and writing, the talents which separated a knowledgeable person from a mere peasant. His passion for the sciences and the analytics which aimed to research magic in all its facets aroused my desire to study these areas, even though they were eyed skeptically by the common people. As a child I had dreamed of becoming a member of the Holy Order, a man whocomprehends the secrets of the world and is respected. I wanted to get rid of my life as a mere nobody and become somebody of distinction.

What sheer irony of fate it was that struck down my father. In life, days may be good or ill. This illness though, I saw coming just once and it never left. It stayed. Before I had even seen the eighth year of my life, I had to witness how the books which he nourished and cherished became his bane. Between the yellowed pages of a weighty tome, an edition which he had bargain-hunted from a merchant and presented to my mother and myself with his head held high, a fungus had lodged itself. It infected him like a crawling parasite and drained him from the inside out. The death caused by this sort of fungus is so slow that you only realize it when it is too late. In my opinion it is one of the worst kinds of death, especially if you consider how it desiccated the face of my deceased father until his bare bones showed.

My Path consecration had some devastating and far-reaching consequences for my young self. How much I had hoped that Malphas would lead me on the Path of the Sublimes so that I would have at least a small chance of joining the Order. I was praying every night for this opportunity, in turn putting all my hope in the hands of our God. In the end the destiny he chose for me was entirely different. The same literate Path as my father's was intended for me. You may think that this is a logical consequence — a son inherits his father's path, that seems reasonable. For me it was the biggest possible disappointment. It was surpassed only by another dramatic experience in my childhood, one which mustn't be omitted here, as it was the cause of my inner corruption.

For a long time my body would convulse whenever I thought back to the following hour. In old age the intensity of such memories strongly dwindles, which is grounded in seeing the world through different eyes. An incredible impudence, nothing more, happened on that late, cold evening of arrival. My mother and I were having supper just when we heard somebody knocking at the door of our house.

As my politeness demanded of me the, albeit small, man of the house, I got up and opened the door. A tall, haggard man in red garb stood in front of me. He was Jagar Sevenstroke, according to his Path a priest in the temple which my family and I visited often. He was often called the father of the weak and the manufacturers, as he cared the most about the concerns of those who needed the most help. To me it always seemed as if he wore a mask above his skinny, skull-like face, which hid his real appearance. Jagar Sevenstroke held a great reputation everywhere in Ark, but even more so in our neighborhood. He had supported my mother when she was grief-stricken over her husband's death. I had never liked him despite all these arguments for his goodwill. There are only a few sentences that he spoke which I can still remember clearly. The first one was his greeting:

"Well Torgan, my little spark, will you let me come inside so that my fragile body doesn't freeze any further in the winter's cold?" he asked me, crouching slightly and with exaggerated friendliness.

I would have loved to close the door, but my mother invited our gracious priest into our house, and she even chided me with a fierce smack for my hesitation. The priest kept us company for supper. I barely listened to his sharp tongue, but I felt as if I could see something terrifying in his eyes while he was speaking to my mother. A hidden and glistening greed. Under the pretext of him asking after our well-being, because my family was especially important to him, my mother quickly forgot all of her distrust and precaution. He directed the conversation towards my father while we ate. My mother always kept me out of everything concerning her dead husband, so she discreetly but at the same time firmly sent me out of the room. I didn't have fiery hair the color of a rutterkin for no reason, as the folk saying goes. While standing in the dark hallway, I further listened in on the conversation through the thin door crack.

For a good while it seemed to me as if he dealt with my mother in an underhanded manner. When she tried to give him another ladle of stew it happened. With a pounding heart I saw how the priest stood up from his chair and walked behind my mother. Disaster was imminent. As she turned around she became frightened by the short distance between them. She gave him the bowl. He, however, immediately put it down on the table.

"You are beautiful Mydame. Why aren't you searching for a new man to be at your side? I am sure that every gentleman would love to be there," that's roughly how he expressed his desire for her. He tried to caress her face but she eluded his advances. And suddenly the priest's failed attempt turned serious. He lunged out with his bony hand and beat her down. The animal, his true face, revealed itself. He dropped all pretense. I witnessed it when he bent over her while she was holding her cheek, when he pressed her down and raised her dress with his wrinkled, old hands. With coarse hands, he forced his will on her. There was more strength in his old hands than one would think. My mother screamed, however she couldn't get free. There are numerous stories telling about how young heroes would attack the man in this same situation and at the same age as myself to impede his inten. I was too scared. Cowardice is a trait of mine which has always come into the picture at the worst of times. Through the

thin door crack I watched how the priest's robe was unveiled. My eyelids closed nearly by themselves, as if my body wanted to prevent my soul from breaking after witnessing the following scene. Nevertheless, I heard every sensual grunt of the priest and every pained groan of my mother. After a while he suddenly paused in his activities. I realized that only by the change of the background noise.

I thought that the nightmare had finally come to an end and peeped through my half-closed eyes. Goosebumps covered my whole body. The skull-like face of Jagar Sevenstroke was looking down on me through the door crack. He viewed me from above, the crouching boy whose mother he had just raped. A crooked smile escaped his grimace.

“Be a good boy and keep on following your Path, then Malphas will have a good impression of you,” he said and closed the door.

He left me alone in the darkness of that hallway. His face was burned into my mind and left extensive scars there. To this day I remember that heretic's face better than my father's, that liar, that traitor of the benevolent Malphas. He should burn in the Sunfire for his sins, especially as my mother certainly wasn't the first woman he exploited in that way. My mother never spoke about that occurrence. She bore the pain silently. One couldn't prosecute a priest, especially one with such an impeccable reputation as Jagar Sevenstroke had, unless one belonged to a high Path and was able to exert a great influence on the clergy. She kept silent. When she did that, a fire started burning in me. It was just a little flame, a spark which came from the embers that was lit by my Path consecration and the disgraceful deed of an envoy of Malphas. Just a wisp of wind or a weak puff would have been enough to extinguish it. However, it was ignited and would determine the course of my life. The flame which was able to melt the chains of my incarcerated will.

The flame of freedom.

The Life of Torgan Whispertongue, Volume 2: The Breach of the Path

My mother became seriously ill. Whether or not this was grounded in the heartache she had suffered from is something I do not know. At that time I felt certain that it had to do with the priest. Some kind of monkey business was at work. Her condition deteriorated so quickly that an apothecarius had to take care of her, as I didn't have enough time to do so in addition to my occupation. The work of a librarian was rather dull and dry. I was pining for more, for my vocation. I studied the sciences, like my father once did together with me, on the quiet and tried to do several easy exercises in magic, which all ended in failure due to my lack of talent. I dreamt about my noble aims, used hours of sorting books for imagining how nice it would be if I could call myself a member of the Holy Order. But that was an impossible dream of mine as my Path held me to where I belonged. Maybe you know the feeling — when you are in a much too tight room, shaft, or something similar and you can't get enough air to breathe. Or if a much too tight shirt takes your breath away — ladies especially should be familiar with the issue of a too tightly laced corset. This was the sentiment I had towards my Path. It held me captive and imprisoned my will.

Despite spending most of my time in private, I found my first and only love in Maressa Greytrue. I would give anything to see her again nowadays. Her laugh was similar to a sunrise above the Red Ocean…but that belongs to another, happier part of my life, one which I won't give any place to in this story. She encouraged me to take my clever experiments and my knowledge to a magister who should acknowledge my talent. But no matter what I tried — whether I ran after them or stalked their houses like a madman — no magister wanted to hear me out or to see what I had to show them. If they would have done so I was confident that they would have received me with open arms. My Path was a prison. The tightness locked me up more and more and I wanted to escape from it. I wanted to break out. At the same time I was at odds with myself and my ideals. It was obvious to my young self that my faith in the Path was misled.

My scientific studies now became social studies. I observed the Path's oppression in all of its extremes: the workers in the tar pit and the Sublimes who lacked nothing. Heat, iron, sweat, blood, and quite often even death by overworking awaited an ordinary man in the tar pit's tunnels. In total contrast were the aristocracy and the Sublimes, who lived high off the hog. I made note of what I saw, especially how the Sublimes treated the Manufacturers when both Paths crossed.

A tremendous coincidence called my attention to a meeting of young citizens which took place in the Undercity. This kind of shady organization obviously wasn't commonly known, but every so often one could find propaganda posters, which were overlooked on the building's walls, even by the attentive

guards. One of those fell into my hands and it didn't take long until a nameless informant told me of the secret gathering place. It was certainly exciting for me with my calm temper to be pulled into such company. Meetings in chambers located underground, with people whose names I didn't know, had never belonged to my everyday activities before. On my way I made sure that I wasn't being followed and entered the aggregation's venue, an abandoned shack in the chaos of the dark Undercity. As our model served Ines Dineja, who was the leader of the Blood Moon Riots, the name of our organization became "The Blood Moon Lodge." I was feeling accepted in the Lodge's ranks. Here I could discuss with other people topics which were shunned in public, about which no prudent Endralean would gossip so viciously. There were even heated discussions with kindred spirits about solutions to political and religious problems.

Although some of the idealists' views seemed too harsh and militant to me, I got myself involved with the Blood Moon Lodge. Their leader, Quindros Aslodar, a young and dynamic man, had spoken of a night which we would never forget, prior to one of the following meetings. And it was just as he said. He distributed Glimmercapdust among the idealists, myself included. I had knowledge of the droga's destructive nature and how many poor souls it had already taken to their graves. Therefore I hesitated. Nevertheless I wanted to stay a member of the Blood Moon Lodge, so I overcame my rationality — and crossed a line that would change my life for years to come. With a fiery speech, Quindros heralded the start of the "Night of Disentanglement" which was to lead us into "total freedom" — he told us so in his inferno of words. Have you ever consumed Glimmercapdust? What I can tell you about this droga is that it is strong enough to make you forget how it tasted or smelled after the intoxication subsides. It takes full effect quickly, and in no time at all reduces you into an uncontrollable lump of flesh, unable to distinguish between left and right. To compare it to an alcoholic stupor would be in no way adequate. Quindros, in his amplified state of mind, shooed us out of the Fallow's meeting place into the Undercity. I lost my fellow campaigners in the chaos before my eyes. My world became distorted while I was stumbling down the dark roads. Human faces turned into the grisly jaws of monsters, preparing to devour me. I saw demons and Lost Ones surrounding me. Jugglers danced hand in hand with myrads. The prostitutes in front of the Silver Cloud didn't look at me with seductive eyes, but instead wore the ugly and hollowed heads of Vatyrs. When they tried to solicit me, I crawled, rushed, and struggled my way into an empty alley where I didn't see any demonic grimaces, but instead a thousand staring eyes on the walls.At the end of this furious night's intoxication, I woke up in a haystack with a throbbing head. In that moment, in which I was staggering through the roads to the exit of the Undercity with a face as white as a sheet, just like a drunk, I had yet to understand that I had changed. The ritual was successful. I was free. I had attained absolute freedom and was successful in cutting off Malphas and his restrictive path.

Now I was … a Pathless One.

The Life of Torgan Whispertongue, Volume 3: The Abyss

What being pathless entails cannot be known by those who have never experienced it for themselves. Contrary to expectations you don't feel the joy of being freed from your chains, as one might have assumed in my case. It means fear. It means a constant dread. It means a feeling of forsakenness, which can be eased neither by love nor friendship. Nobody can survive pathless, and if someone claims the opposite they are the biggest liar in all of Vyn.

My mother died of her illness and I lost Maressa as I used most of my time to consume drogae. No sane woman loves such a man who is lost in those. Due to my addiction, the taxmen took my parents' house into their custody. My money ran through my hands like sand. Without any means of payment, there was no place for me in the Uppercity anymore.

The Blood Moon Lodge slowly perished due to its ideals. Its members shared my fate: In becoming pathless they had lost their meaning inlife. Quindros Aslodar and some of the remaining members ventured into recklessness — painting curses onto the Temple's walls — and were hung for it.

The muck of Leorans soon stuck to the soles of my shoes as an unremovable companion. Stench and rot plagued my body. My teeth became brittle, and the skin peeled off my bones. I drowned my worries and hopelessness in alcohol. The final remnants of my self-esteem dwindled. The urge to leave my Path had spelled my ruin. Now I suddenly realized that the restrictions of the Path were nothing in comparison to the restrictions of utter freedom. The latter was vastly more overwhelming even though you won't be able to understand it, as you have never felt the same freedom as I have. Bare, merciless freedom can't be tamed. Especially if you are the same weakling as I was and am. If I would have at least had a Path, a firm purpose which I could have adhered to, this avalanche of mischief most likely would never have been set off.

There aren't many happy memories remaining from that time. My daily routine while being Pathless was waking up, taking drogae so I could while away the day, eating any rubbish I could find from the Undercity's streets, and boozing in the evening so that I could sleep. All semblance of organization disappeared from my life. Malphas' pointing and reprimanding hand didn't watch over me anymore. In the Undercity one can't distinguish between night and day, as there is neither sun nor fresh wind. Hence I couldn't say which month or time of day it was as I walked around without rest or aim, as I often did. I was struggling along, holding onto the walls of houses so that I didn't keel over. A band of muggers — no rare phenomena — caught sight of this easy prey and seized their chance. They beat the living daylights out of me only to realize that all they could take off of me was a pouch of Glimmercapdust. Guffawing, they left me lying in a muddy puddle, wounded and bleeding. My limbs

hurt, but I managed to crawl forward. Near me a bard was belting out the song of the "Pathless Wanderer." Scraps of the song accompanied me as I went crawling through the mud. I drug myself into an old masonry which had been forsaken long ago, and was a hidden entrance to the Undercity's catacombs. Rats were gnawing at my body.

Then I saw it in front of me clearly: a pitch-black figure without any discernible facial features. It was slim and had wiry limbs. Dark, smoldering clouds of smoke were flowing around its feet, obscuring them. Death had visited me in the form of the Black Guardian. I was closer to the Sun Fire than ever before. It just stood there staring at me, until it reached out one of its hands. It was waiting till the last breath of life would leave my body. It was certainly enticing to agree to its offer of ending this tragedy. But the last spark of will within me clung to my sorry life in this world. The Black Guardian had to go away empty-handed, and I continued on with my horrible destiny, knowing full well that I had merely delayed the hour of my final judgment.

The Life of Torgan Whispertongue, Volume 4: Catastrophe

The man's lifeless body laid next to my feet. The faint light of the moon gleamed silvery and eerily in the deep red puddle underneath him. An odd feeling of numbness hit me the moment in which the dark wafts of mist in my head dispersed.

I had killed him. I was a murderer.

The man had merely asked me whether I was alright, whether I needed help. A nice fellow who only has…had good in mind. In my intoxication it wasn't his face I saw in front of me, but rather the face of the priest who had raped my mother many years ago, the mask of Jagar Sevenstroke. The visage of the man who truly deserved to die. As I saw the innocent, deceased man at my feet, the entirety of my previous life seized me. It caught up with me, like a shadow which becomes one with its body. I had the feeling that I wasn't part of a worldly providence anymore, but rather of a godly one: the creative means of a greater being. I took the last option I had: I took to my heels and fled Ark. I left the city at dawn and forever turned my back on it and all which had happened therein. The withdrawal of the drogae left me sleepless for whole nights in the wilderness. It was similar to an odyssey of getting back up out from the deep abyss in which I had fallen. At its end, I was standing in front of a monastery's gates. Secluded, high on a rock and surrounded by the icy squalls of the Frostcliff Mountains, it stood before me, the last stage of my journey. Its gates received me like the saving arms of Malphas himself. I confessed that I had sinned and disregarded my Path. The benevolent head of the monastery redeemed me from my heartache and told me that Malphas wouldn't be angry as long as I heeded my sole, true Path from now on. Then I took a holy vow. I was received as a friar in the monastery. My long-lost, virtuous self was freed back onto the Path. My Pathless, dark side I have recorded in this book's lines. By writing this down, it shall be banned from the face of this world and shall never haunt me again.

Let me address you with some final words, before you lay aside this book: Each human needs their firm place in this world, be it merely as a miner in the depths, or as a Sublime's shoeshiner. My belief that the Path and religion around Malphas was misled was flawed, as I only knew the before and not the after. If you do not know such, it is always easy to speculate excessively about how to make the world a better place. The sole, true Path for us humans amounts to what we believe in with a firm dedication. Malphas helps us to illuminate the dark ways of life. His Paths are no restrictive prison. They are our home, our anchor in a stormy sea. I know Pathlessness, and that's why I can reveal this one truth to you and to all people searching for advice in our monastery, no matter what their circumstances are — "Those who are not honoring Malphas' Path will never catch sight of the world's light."

The Lost Brigand

As he opened his eyes, looking into the darkness, a stench of decay and fetidness entered his nose. His whole body shivered. What kind of place was this? He remembered the last skirmish. It had been a seemingly harmless carriage. A simple raid, nothing else - kill the merchants and leave them rotting on the ground. Just this one time something was wrong. Only after the first shot left his bow he noticed the symbol on the deep blue cloak of the carriage driver: the Eye and the Sword - the Order. Everything occurred within seconds. He wanted to shout a warning to his comrades, who were charging the carriage with their weapons drawn but it was too late. He felt how the Keeper's ebony eyes stared at him and caught sight of an expression of deepest regret. Then he was gripped by an otherworldly power and hurled against the palisade protected by pointed wooden beams. And even before he closed his eyes, he realized what his life as a pathless one incurred.

He felt out the darkness with his still hurting hands. Did he just imagine that, or did this stench of death actually stem from himself?

His hands came across something hard. Cold, merciless stone. He slid the heavy coffin lid of his glum grave and sat up. His every muscle hurt, his eyes felt like liquid fire, and he wondered why everything around him seemed to have lost its colors. He was situated in a cave. Drearily water was dripping down from the stone ceiling, second after second, as if it wanted to stretch the time eternally with its sound. He emerged from the coffin and searched for an exit, any indication of light, and finally detected a small breach in the cave ceiling from which a weak, sallow beam fell onto a little, overgrown lake. Water. His whole body demanded water. Step by step he walked in the direction of the light, in the direction of the cold, bliss promising refreshment, his eyes solely focusing straight ahead. He didn't perceive that he was sharing this place with others.

Only with utmost effort he managed to heave his broken body to the underground lake and eventually got down on his knees wearily. Water at last. He put both of his hands in the form of a bowl without taking heed of the dried blood on the expensive shadow wolf gloves which he stole from an unarmed merchant from Nehrim long ago. A dull joy ran through his body as the cool water flowed down his parched soul. He would rest another, maybe another two hours and then he would wind up trying to find a way out of this cave. Certainly he even smiled when thinking about his luck, which had to have protected him from the Keeper's magic. Merely few brigands could boast about withstanding a warrior of the Order without preparation like him. He would find him, that son of a Vatyr and then he would ram his sword into the Keeper's chest, just as that guy deserved. Yes, it would happen like that.

Until he eventually noticed the fluid running down from his throat. He detected a black figure which sat up behind him and whose shadow casted a distorted, terrifying silhouette. He grasped his throat.

Water. The same cold water which he just scooped from the lake ran out of his maw. In panic, he palpated his neck with his glove. Only now he noticed the stake, which protruted from his throat and hampered his movements so much. His clothes were tattered, blood-smeared. He pulled the stake out and the gush of blood mixed itself straightaway with the gray, merciless lake water that refused to give his body refreshment. Only now he looked at his reflection in the water. His reflection? He had been a good-looking man with long hair and a full beard, but what he saw in the water wasn't more than a disfigured visage, without nose, blood-smeared, with festering wounds on the high forehead. No humanity at all.

Full of fear he turned around. This wasn't a simple cave. This was a tomb. His tomb.

Quite a number of bent gestalts strayed in the cavern, some sitting silently on their coffins, some beating on the big steel door of the mass grave, corroded by madness.

Then he realized that he had died that day. But he was a criminal; he was pathless, and he was denied his last journey. He was entombed, only to revive as a living corpse, his soul and body slowly decaying, searching for the peace that he had refused for himself in life.

The Path, Tome 1: The Chaos

I

Long ago, while the world was still unriven it was called Pangora. Pangora was great and mighty and reached from current Kilé to Enderal. But all life faded away as it was under no man's reign and ruins were all that remained of the old ones, the Pyreans. And so it would have remained, if Asâtoron had not come into being — the first Aeterna, the scourge of the ash, the malevolent sovereign of those early days.

II

In the first centuries Asâtoron roamed Pangora alone and shaped the world to his liking. However, he was cruel and heartless and thirsted after pain and suffering. He created two men: one from ash and one from his own blood. The bloodmen he called Aeterna, for he gifted them with longevity and magical power. The men of ash were weak and ephemeral and were created by Asâtoron to serve not just the Aeterna, but Asâtoron himself, who stood above all things

III

Under the scourge of Asâtoron and his servants, the ashmen erected buildings and cities. Great was the suffering the ashmen had to endure! Yet with each passing year Asâtoron's vile madness grew until his hatred began to spread not only to the ashmen, but also to his own kin, the Aeterna. And so it came to pass that he ordered the death of all life, disgruntled by his own creation. From his fingertips flew lightning bolts, which destroyed palaces and temples alike. And everyone who looked upon his countenance became consumed by madness and thrust a sword into his neighbor's breast, and then his own. So it was that the ashmen and Aeterna perished, until no more than a few hundred remained.

IV

All were destined to die, and surely they would have, but the sky broke open first and a star, gigantic and engulfed in flames, blazed down from the heavens. It shattered Pangora into six large parts and numerous splinters — and so Vyn was created, the world in which we live today.He who claims to know of Asâtoron's destiny is a liar, as he was never seen again.

V

Tired of war, the few remaining ashmen and Aeterna scattered across the continents. The grudge harbored by those born from ash against the long-lived Aeterna was great, however their weariness and exhaustion after Asâtoron's bloody rage was even greater. So the ashmen blended with the Aeterna

and their blood became impure. The tips of their ears shrunk and their longevity shortened to little more than a century. Even their gift of magic was extinguished and became a shadow of what Asâtoron had bestowed upon them.

VI

A new people of short stature emerged from the debris of the fallen star and called themselves Starlings. The second age had commenced.

VII

Civilizations arose on the continents and cities were built. Both humans and Half-Aeterna, as well as the Starlings, sought peace. However, with the end of Asâtoron's subjugation their fetters, which had bound them in place, had broken loose! And so an era of violence, war, and lust for power followed, as everyone hungered after the throne for power and dominion!

VIII

For almost four thousand years this era of chaos persisted, and once again it seemed as if life was at the very brink of destruction, since humans, Aeterna, and Starlings were all unable to respect one another and live in harmony and peace. Nevertheless, one day a light appeared in the sky and with it seven figures, as large as towers. The people bombarded it with magic and arrows, blinded by their thirst for blood and depravity. — But no fireball, no crossbow's bolt could cut through to the figures. Thus men laid down their arms and fell to their knees, as they realized they were facing gods. All seven rose to speak, their voices chaste and clear as purest crystal.

The Path, Tome 2: The Epiphany

IX

“Before us, there was Chaos and after us Chaos will remain. Since man has a weak spirit and a spoiled heart, it is only under divine guidance that he shall blossom. Do not grieve over bowing your heads to us! Fools mistake our might with tyranny, even as sages recognize our deepest desire: to shoulder the burden of man's foolishness — and to protect humanity.”

X

Yet not everyone realized the Light-Borns' divinity. And so it happened that a great man stepped forward. His name was Melros.

XI

“You claim to be gods!” he shouted at the Light-Borns with a firm voice. “The last god who reigned over us brought us nothing but harm and destruction! You claim that your wish is to protect us, but how can we trust you?”

XII

One of the figures drifted down towards Melros. Still endowed with light, its body narrowed to become even smaller than the man in front of it. It was the Light-Born Irlanda.

XIII

”Your doubts bespeak wisdom, oh Melros. And yes, Asâtoron was deluded and wicked! But it came from ignorance. Even though he was aware of his divinity, his origin was as much a mystery to him as it was to us. It was this Uncertainty which devastated his heart.“

XIV

“We are of a different kind. We are the messengers of peace. Follow us and this world shall blossom. Our reign will last eternally, since we are not of flesh and blood as you are. We, Oh Melros, are the Light-Born.”

XV

And Melros acknowledged the divinity of the figure standing in front of him. Filled with awe and understanding, he fell to his knees and begged their pardon.

XVI

So began the hegemony of the Light-Born. And it was righteous, for the Light-Born were true gods, free of human vices, free of Asâtoron's madness.

The Path, Tome 3: The Gods

XVII

The gods are seven in number.

XVIII

There is Tyr, the father of the gods, the highest of the Light-Born. He has not been allotted any land, for he rules over Inodan, the land of the gods at the edge of the world.

XIX

There is Irlanda, the goddess of judgment. She has been allotted the steppe-land of Arazeal, sectioned into merciless stone deserts and fertile coastal regions. Irlanda is merciful, yet severe, for she judges over those who in their foolishness do not appreciate the rule of the gods.

XX

There is Saldrin, the god of knowledge and progress. He has been allotted Qyra, the land of the everlasting desert, watered only by two great, golden rivers. Saldrin blesses the thinkers and philosophers, for he knows that a human is able to achieve greatness with the right assistance.

XXI

There is Morala, the goddess of language and commerce. She brought Inal, the holy language, to the civilized world, and is the reason why every soul is able to understand one another on Vyn today. She has been allotted the islands of Kilé with its rich, green groves and roaring waterfalls.

XXII

There is Esara, the goddess of memories. She has not been allotted any land either, for she tends to the halls of knowledge on Inodan, the divine land at the rim of the world. She is the mistress of the council of the gods.

XXIII

There is Erodan, god of wisdom and old rites. He has been allotted Nehrim, the largest of all continents, with its dry steppes, green forests, and wintry mountains. He reigns with foresight, and he is tasked with tending the ways of the gods.

XXIV

There is Malphas, the guardian of the gods. He has been allotted Enderal, the secluded but rich land in the northeastern part of the world. He established the order of the Seraphim, the guardians. They are the ones who grant us safety and subjugate those who live a sinful life to Irlanda's sentence. His is the land in which we live.

The Path, Tome 4: The Departure

XXV

Secluded and perilous, an untamed land, that is how Enderal was before the revelation of the Light-Born. Wild creatures roamed freely, and rich forests reached from east to west and from south up to north's wintry mountains.

XXVI

And it came to pass that Malphas descended and appeared to a woman and a man. The woman's name was Selna, the man's was Ketaron. Both were low-born and had to endure great anguish during the wars of their country. They lived in a decrepit hut amidst a city that was scarred by devastation. However, they were pious and of goodwill. Replete with awe they fell to their knees as the Light-Born appeared before them, since both were witnesses of the revelation of the Light-Born and acknowledged him as one of the seven true gods.

XXVII

And Malphas spoke: "Arise, my children! And rejoice, for you are about to be accorded a great honor. From this day forward you shall serve me solely. Your punishment will be severe, should you fail me — however, if you serve me sincerely, you shall experience eternity in my name!"

XXVIII

It was Selna, who answered first. "Oh lord, we submit, for we recognize your divinity! Yet how can you bestow eternity upon us? We are humans, and not even the blood of Asâtoron's sons, the Aeterna, courses through our veins! In twenty years I will wither — in forty years only bones will remain! That is the way of the world and not even Asâtoron was able to change that!" Malphas approached the woman. His voice was hard as stone, but still full of wisdom and empathy. "That is how it was under his subjugation — that is how it was in the profane years which you have lived through. But we, oh children, we are true gods. See and bear witness to my endless power!"

XXIX

And the figure of light, which was Malphas, turned around and raised his hands heavenward — and thousands of lightning bolts shot downwards. They shattered Selna's and Ketaron's miserable hut with a loud crack and destroyed the wretched city surrounding them. Yes, even those who harbored doubt despite the Light-Born's revelation and whose souls were tainted were smashed. The odor of smoke and ashes filled the air.

XXX

No harm befell Selna and Ketaron, nor the two-hundred men and women who had gathered around the Light-Born who were full of anguish and veneration. Malphas lowered his arms and spoke with his head held high.

XXXI

“We are gods and rulers over the elements, time, and life itself! And as surely as I am standing here, I proclaim: Those who follow me and honor my teachings, wander upon my path. And should you tread properly to its end, I shall grant you entry to the eternal paths, where you will experience eternal bliss, peace, and exhilaration!”

XXXII

Both Selna and Ketaron, as well as the two-hundred destitute souls who were gathered around them, lowered their heads and understood. And so they became the first vassals.

XXXIII

They all packed their belongings and followed Malphas to the coast, where two plain but solid ships awaited them. And Malphas spoke once again: “You shall be the offspring of my eternal kingdom. Board the ships and sail to the north, until you spot the red star. It will guide you to the holy land, which unites winter, summer, and autumn. There you shall build the foundation for all the thousands who will follow you.” And thus he vanished. This time became known as the month of “Departure.”

XXXIV

The first vassals pursued Malphas' call and set sail, unaware of their divine task. They did not know where their route would lead them, but they had faith.

The Path, Tome 5: The Hunger Days

XXXV

After eight moons the famine began. Even though they had packed plentiful wheat, water, and salted meat, no one had known how long the journey would last. The vassals became restless and some of them became dubious. “What if this was a ruse?” one of them exclaimed to Selna. She remained vigilant, for she has not forgotten the sight of the Light-Born Malphas. And whilst he was not aboard, she sensed that he was watching them and each of their words and every single deed.

XXXVI

But not all the vassals had faith. And so it happened that twenty-four of them connived against the rest. They schemed a pathless plan: In the coming night they were to split up — A dozen to creep onto the other ship and to plunder their food storage; the other dozen, to stab the rest of the crew on their own ship in their sleep. Then they would sail away alone.

XXXVII

And the plan worked. — No guards were stationed in front of the storerooms, for no one could have conceived of such treason from their own ranks. And so on the very next day, Selna found her ship alone on the high sea, their supplies robbed to the last piece of salted meat.

XXXVIII

Chaos broke out! The remaining survivors raised their hands heavenwards frantically and begged Malphas, as they saw their destinies set in stone. Yet again Selna and Ketaron remained calm and prayed. “We tread on the righteous path,” they said full of dignity. “And we will find the red star and the holy land as well.”

XXXIX

So weeks of agony followed, which are known today as “The Hunger Days” in the moon calendar. Malphas did not appear, in spite of the vassals' numerous prayers. Querulous voices were heard: “The gods have abandoned us,” they sobbed. “And our fate is to die on the high seas!” And this time Ketaron answered: “Do not lose your faith, brothers and sisters! Malphas augured to gift us eternity, if we abide upon the righteous path — his path! And he will do so.” He paused for a moment and then spoke words of wisdom: “What worth does path-abiding have, adhering to veracity, if there are no hurdles to overcome?”

XL

And Selna recognized the divinity of the words. “To be unwavering and to never forget the omnipotence of the gods. - That is what distinguishes a strong spirit from a weak one, a true believer from a heretic!”

The Path, Tome 6: The Lost Ones

XLI

Yet scarcely had the words faded when a happy shout broke the silence. Suddenly an island appeared on the horizon. And it was magnificent — for it had cascading crystal-clear rivers, banana trees growing higher than two men, and game which could nourish a whole army with its meat.

XLII

The vassals put in and feasted on the god-given delicacies. One week and a day they stayed on the island, regained their strength and refilled their supplies, while those who betrayed them were still straying pathless on the sea. Day after day their pillaged rations dwindled — and day after day resentment and despair grew in their hearts.

XLIII

And so the day came, when the storage chambers were completely empty. And in their exasperation and malice they began to butcher themselves, ripping the meat off their ribs and eating it. Yet even after this gruesome act, there was no respite given to them — for they had sinned. And so it was that instead of sinking into darkness after the light of life faded, they realized with dismay that they still could see, feel, and live.

XLIV

And so they moaned and groaned, walking the deck reduced to skeletons on bony legs; yes, some even plunged into the sea, only to realize that no matter how much water poured into their lungs, they could not drown. Filled with rage and horror they screamed, a choir of agony, and their screams reached from Kilé to Arazeal, from Arazeal to Qyra. And even Malphas' loyal vassals, who had not left the righteous path and feasted upon the delicacies of nature on the island, heard it. And they knew immediately what had happened: Malphas had cast his judgment, as he does today on those who have left the righteous path. The treacherous seamen were lost, and their ship drifts in the mists of the Red Sea and the Past Sea to this day.

XLV

A whole moon passed before the faithful vassals regained their strength. With barrels filled with clear water, exotic fruits, and salted meat they set sail. They continued sailing to the north, as Malphas ordered, and yet there was still no sign of the red star to be seen in the firmament.

The Path, Tome 7: The Kraken

XLVI

Days and weeks had passed, when one day the vassals crossed a dismal sea, with water dark as a raven's feathers. Giant, grey monoliths stretched aloft like spears, and a misty shroud hung over the passage like a veil. Still the vassals remained steadfast, and they had almost passed the fog, when an enormous creature raised itself up from the sea. It had tentacles, thick as wooden logs, and its eyes shone red in the gloom of the night.

XLVII

The monster heaved forward a tentacle and battered it against the ship with all its might. Wood ruptured and the mast broke apart. The vassals screamed with terror, shock, and panic as they realized they had no hope in opposing the creature completely unarmed. This time it was Ketaron who proved his fortitude.

XLVIII

While the tentacles of the creature raged, and fountains of black water erupted from the sea, he walked towards the bow of the ship, close enough to look directly into the eyes of the monstrosity. Selna yelled words of warning, but he ignored her, as he knew what had to be done. For one moment silence reigned as the creature scrutinized its seemingly small opponent with suspicion. It then raised itself from the depths, each tentacle wrapped around one of the monoliths and opened its demonic maw, filled with fangs as long and sharp as fence posts. Bones, planks, and algae fell out, and a rotten stench hit Ketaron. Yet he did not lose heart, nor did he even twitch, for he was filled with his faith in Malphas and the righteous path.

XLIX

And so the monster sprang towards Ketaron, its abysmal jaws fully opened, ready to devour him! For the last time he turned to face his comrades, Malphas' first vassals, and gave them a sad, but certain smile. Suddenly he was engulfed in lightning bolts.

L

White and glaring, they were numerous, and as thunderous as the roar of a hurricane. They flickered around his body, flashing from his fingertips and even from his very eyes. And before Selna or any of their companions could even begin to realize what was happening, he dove into the beast's maw.

LI

How fast the expression of greed and joyful hunger faded from its demonic visage! It shouted out so loudly that it was audible from Kilé to Artkwend, from Qyra to Nehrim. Filled with pain it thrashed about, lashing its tentacles to escape the agony. But it could not, for its fate was decided. And then, after numerous minutes of anguish, it burst like a ceramic jar thrown to the ground. Its flesh was brown, its blood black, and a thousand small pieces rained down on the befuddled vassals and their ship. Barely had the remains of the creature touched the cold darkness of the sea and the wooden surface of the ship when they dissipated. When it was all over, there was no evidence left of the monster's existence, except for the splintered mast — and the disappearance of Ketaron.

LII

Incredulous, unable to comprehend what had occurred, the vassals remained rooted where they stood. Yet it was Selna who had the scales fall from her eyes. And so she stepped in front of her friends and proclaimed with a loud voice:

LIII

“Do not mourn his death, brothers and sisters! He died a hero and saved all of our lives!”

LIV

One of the vassals, an old man, said: “How was he able to summon the storm? Asâtoron and the Aeterna were also able to work these wonders! And their hearts were corrupt! I do not understand, sister Selna! Please explain!”

LV

And Selna responded: “Magic is neither vile nor good! It was bestowed upon us by the gods, and we must decide whether to use it for mischief or for good.”

LVI

Thereupon the old vassal asked: “But what if somebody misuses this gift, like the Aeterna did over all those centuries? Who will judge them righteously, as they are mightier than five dozen soldiers?”

LVII

Now it was Malphas' voice, which resonated from Selna's mouth, godly and illustrious. “They punish themselves! Magic is a trial and a burden, and only the most path-abiding of the faithful will not succumb to it! Those who do will never find their way to the eternal paths, which await those of you who worship me during your lifetime! You shall persecute those wild mages, hunt and bring justice to them, for they endanger the peace of the kingdom which you will build under my aegis!”

LVIII

And once again the vassals recognized truth in the Light-Born's words. Few there were who discovered magic within themselves over the course of the voyage — but those who did unveiled their gift and used it for the welfare of the society, and were not driven by greed and vested interest. For only as a consequence of their comrade's martyrdom, the holy Ketaron, was it possible to continue sailing, for he had slain the demonic beast. And so it happened that this moon came to be known as "The Kraken."

The Path, Tome 8: The Arrival

LIX

Three moons had now passed since the vassals set sail, and one moon after the kraken's attack their path-abiding was to be rewarded: On a starlit night, in the dead of winter, a red shining star appeared in the firmament. They recognized it immediately: It was the red star for which they had been searching. And despite the bitter wind and the surrounding ice their hearts were light, for they knew they now had but to trust the divinity. Thirty-one days they sailed — and as a new year began, the moment they all craved arrived. This last moon of their journey, for which we now celebrate the end of the year, became known to us as the "Winter Star."

LX

The sight awaiting the vassals was glorious. Faltering, they stepped upon the land they had to colonize. Filled with awe and gratitude they fell to their knees, raised their hands towards Inodan and thanked the Light-Born and their guardian Malphas for his protection. A great time awaited them. And in remembrance of this exceptional time, we call the first moon of the year, "The Arrival."

LXI

For one more moon the vassals explored the new lands. Marvelous was this land gifted by Malphas for them to colonize! Deep-green woods full of life covered the hills. Animals of unknown species scurried through the thicket, and lakes and rivers were full of nutritious fish. However, the land they had to explore was large, and Selna knew they required a sanctuary as a starting point for their exploration while they searched for an appropriate location for their new capital. In an ancient forest, full of knotted trees whose rustling leaves reminded them of whispering, they made a discovery. And it was at this moment as Selna thrust her spade into the ground to erect the first palisade of their outpost, that Malphas sent her a divine revelation: Enderal, the land of a thousand leaves — this would be the name of the new kingdom, which shall outlast the millenia. This magnificent moment would be known as "The Groundbreaking," and the chroniclers named the second moon of the new year after it.

LXII

For many weeks the valorous pioneers persevered in their new refuge, for despite all the prosperity the foreign, savage land offered, it also bore dangers they had to brave. Gigantic birds, half-goat, half-lizard, roamed the skies and devoured man-sized cattle in a single bite. Large, pitch-black wolves, whose pelts gave them their name "Shadow Wolves," strayed through the forests. And even though

the vassals knew that Malphas would hold his protecting hand over them for as long as they were loyal to him and the other gods, they also knew that they were responsible for their own lives. They built walls from stone to protect their refuge in the Whisperwood, and they kept watch to fend off the hostile creatures, while resting from the exertions of their long voyage. At the end of the moon of the Delving of the Spade, Selna began preparations to explore the land.

LXIII

The men and women learned to respect Selna, for it had been Ketaron and she who had granted them their unscathed arrival. Therefore it was she who planned the ensuing research judiciously. At the beginning of the new month, the vassals set out into the wilderness, split into four groups, leaving two dozen men and women along with their children and elderly at the base. This moon is known to us as "The Exploration."

LXIV

The vassals had to fend off numerous dangers during the exploration of the land; however, just as many wondrous sights greeted them. They found a warm and beautiful moor in the south, where the sun shone incessantly. In the north they found a cold, snow-covered mountain-range. In the northwest they found a forest which bloomed in golden, deep-red colors, as well as a region full of green plains and lakes in the heart of the land.

The Path, Tome 9: The Fundament

LXV

The vassals, overwhelmed by the land's prosperity and vastness, had difficulties finding a location to build their new capital. Where could they cultivate their crops, raise their children, and build a society which could turn path-abiding into a felicitous future under Malphas' protection? That is when Selna exclaimed to the Light-Born: “Malphas, show us the site. Where should we build the temple in homage to you with the city around it?”

LXVI

And Malphas answered: “Do you see the rocky cliff projecting over the countryside amidst the Heartland? This shall be the site of my temple. Pile up stone on stone and you will build a structure which will grant you protection and illumination for all time.” The vassals were startled for they were not many, had only a few tools, and the cliff was high and steep. Yet Selna comforted them, and so they began to mine the first rocks and brought them to the summit of the cliff.

LXVII

They had only established one foot of the wall by the first evening, and they were already exhausted and weary. Silently they endured the task given to them, but within some vile doubts sprouted as to whether the task could be done. Selna sensed their thoughts and told them: “Let us sleep now, let us rest and confide in Malphas, as he has entrusted us with this task.”

LXVIII

As they awoke the very next morning, they caught sight of an almost shoulder-high wall, which enclosed the whole plateau and depicted the outline of a magnificent building. Euphoric they rushed to work, knowing full well that they were only worthy of divine assistance in the construction of the temple if they were to exert all their strength during the day. And so the cornerstone for this new city was laid, and the fourth month of the year was named “The Fundament.”

LXIX

The Sun Temple grew due to men's arduous diligence and the incomprehensible help of the divine hand. However, as the remaining vassals came to the Heartland and laid eyes on the enormous building, they were struck with fear. “We are supposed to build a city here? In the shadow of this cliff? The tremendous temple makes the rock unstable already, even though it is unfinished!” And many of those

who were steadily constructing higher walls glanced at the site with the same anxiety and pointed at the subtle fissures which had formed in the cliff's rock.

LXX

And Selna watched with a heavy heart as more and more vassals withdrew to the hinterlands to build small farms at an allegedly safe distance from the imposing, but menacing building. "Trust in Malphas," she yelled again and again. "He is the one who is constantly protecting us and is showing us the righteous path." But the skeptics did not want to listen. They assured her of their loyalty to Malphas and supplied those who were still building the temple with a great amount of food, which they grew on their lands. Yet still they fled from the face of the cliff after each visit.

LXXI

And so it happened that only a small fraction of vassals remained to finish the Sun Temple. Disregarding the rock creaking under the weight of the temple, they continued their arduous labor tirelessly. However, as they awoke the morning after the completion of the temple's framework, they cast their eyes upon something marvelous: The shapeless, brittle rock of the cliff had become a gigantic stone statue of Malphas, which carried the burden of the temple's weight on its mighty shoulders. It was a blissful sight and in shame and reverence even the skeptics came from their hinterlands and clustered around the masterpiece to behold the wonder.

LXXII

That is when the voice of the Light-Born resonated thunderously. Malphas himself spoke from within the stone figure: "Hear, vassals. You have all walked my path, and explored and colonized this land. You all are and will remain path-abiding. But only those who trusted my words and built this temple without fear or hesitation are worthy of living in its glory and being closer to me. You are the stout, the dauntless, the Sublimes. You shall carry the title "Dal" before your name, as will your descendants, to always remember your fearless, enormous deed.

LXXIII

Ashamed, most of the doubters moved closer to the vicinity of the temple, knowing very well that the highest and most gorgeous parts of the prospective city were reserved for the Sublimes. The land surrounding the cliff was dry and barren, yet with a strong desire to never doubt Malphas again, they prepared themselves to cultivate the land with even more toil.

LXXIV

However, as the new farms were built on the dry earth surrounding the city, a rumble sounded one evening from above. In the midst of the temple's court, a rock shattered and a well released clear, delightful water, which spread through canals and whose significance was not immediately understood.

Unstoppable, the water poured towards the rim of the temple and off the cliff; it spread all over the land and rendered it more fertile than the rest of Enderal's regions. The river was named Larxes, the life-giver, by the vassals and as it carved its way through the still young land and the hinterlands, the clouds opened and revealed a shimmering, golden full-moon, whose light danced upon the surface of the divine river. From that day onward, the fifth month of the year has been called "The Golden Moon."

The Path, Tome 10: The Order

LXXV

The country's capital was steadily growing. The vassals furnished their homes and began to raise families. Even Selna became aware of a child in her womb, the fruit of her love with her late spouse, Ketaron. Humbly she kneeled in the Sun Temple in front of the great statue of Malphas and prayed to him. “Which path shall my offspring tread, Malphas? You spoke to us and led us to this land, but how shall our descendants, who are born here, find their path?”

LXXVI

Then Malphas spoke to Selna: “Hear my words and proclaim them to all vassals: Each of your children shall receive their Path Consecration at the age of eight. Those who devote their life to becoming a priest of mine shall conduct the ceremony and through them I shall speak and assign to each child their path. He will be told if he is going to be a Sublime, an Erudite, or a Manufacturer, and he will receive a task which he shall fulfill path-abidingly, for he will not want to become a pathless one, who treads banished from the divine order and godly protection.”

LXXVII

“But your son, whom you still carry within you, Selna, will receive his path from me right now. He shall become the first grandmaster of the Holy Order, who will fill this temple with life from now on. And you, Selna, will instruct him in this task from the day of his birth, as his mother and servant, the first Truchessa of the order.”

LXXVIII

Humbly, Selna heard the voice of the Light-Born, and she declared his words on the great forecourt of the temple, after representatives of all the vassals' families had gathered there.

LXXIX

And she declared even more of Malphas' will: The temple shall host those who wield a sword in the name of Malphas, to guard the Path-Abiding ones in Enderal, as well as those who record and proclaim his teachings, against their foes.

LXXX

There shall be a Sanctum in the Sun Temple, to pray to Malphas and to indulge in his wisdom. There shall be a Chronicum, to lay down all the teachings and events of the coming ages in order to educate and illuminate the people. There shall be a Curarium, to provide healing to the ill and wounded of the Holy Order. There shall be an Emporium, to provide the grandmaster and his loyalists a refuge in their mutual pursuit of guiding the order and serving Malphas' will.

LXXXI

Not only were children born, but the vassals' dead were also mourned. When the first of the elderly had died, Selna, the Truchessa, brought him to the Sanctum and laid him on a bier in front of the Light-Born's statue.

LXXXII

And yet again Malphas spoke to Selna: "Do not bring your dead here. If they were path-abiding, carry them to a place which had been important to them in life and burn their body in the fading light of a setting sun. If they have unfailingly followed their destined path, I will accept them in the eternal paths above the firmament before dawn's first light. They will dwell in a place where no mortal will ever enter, and fortune, peace, and unity reign."

LXXXIII

"Those who have not followed their path loyally, I shall send back to begin a new life with new tasks and trials, until they tread their path faithfully to the end; then they too will be allowed to ascend to the eternal paths."

The Path, Tome 11: The Treason

LXXXIV

And this was also reported to the first Truchessa of the order by Malphas: “Know, Selna, that there will be those who stray completely off their given path and lead a life of malice and infidelity. They shall be judged by the path-abiding ones with the sword or live their pitiful lives as lost, like the 24 pathless ones on their ship, until they shall be redeemed from their deserved torments by the blade.”

LXXXV

“Listen, Selna: There is one among you right now who has given his path up completely and has forfeited my divine clemency. It is your duty to find and prosecute him. This will lead to sorrow and will require a death toll, yet even this is a part of the trials I will impose upon you and whose accomplishment will strengthen and fortify your society of path-abiding ones.”

LXXXVI

At that time Selna heard a racket and screams from the city beneath the temple. Weapons clashed and voices drew near. The Truchessa summoned the Keepers of the Order and declared to them that their first true ordeal was imminent. “Pathless ones cause harm and death to those who were left under our protection. Let us step in front of the temple's gates and confront them. We must not tarry, so that the traitors may not do any more mischief.”

LXXXVII

That is when the pathless ones, who left a trail of blood behind them, came upwards to the temple. Kilra, one of the doubters from the time of the temple's construction and head of the greatest farm in front of the city, rallied twenty followers to overpower the unsuspecting people of the order and to seize power with swords and bows. The attack was quick and merciless, and the Keepers of the Order had little to set against the brutality of the pathless ones, despite their magnificent armor and the premonition of the Truchessa.

LXXXVIII

Most of the order's warriors fell in the first moments of the assault, and the temple would have become a cradle for pathlessness , if not for the remaining citizens and countrymen who united to strike into the back of Kilra's band. With dreadful casualties the path-abiding vassals managed to defeat the renegades on the steps of the temple.

LXXXIX

Only Kilra himself survived and for his treason, he was sentenced to death by the Truchessa. On the same evening the city's inhabitants gathered on the forecourt of the Sun Temple to witness the execution of the traitor. Repenting of his deeds, he faced his righteous punishment without hesitation and proclaimed some remaining insight with a firm voice: “Our sins, small and great, will not evade the watchful eyes of our lord. And his retribution will follow as certain as the next sunrise.” The Truchessa herself resided wounded in her rooms, cared for by the healers of the order. Her labor started prematurely, having been induced by the gruesome events of the day. At exactly this moment, as the sword swung towards the neck of the traitor Kilra under the window of her chambers, she gave birth to her son. From this day on, the sixth moon of a year would be known as “Kilra's Treason.”

The Path, Tome 12: The Star Summer Night

XC

Strengthened and full of trust in Malphas, the vassals, from whom the Endraleans originated, progressed from these trying times of construction and treason.

XCI

The city underneath the Sun Temple grew and became more magnificent day by day. Its inhabitants dubbed it Ark, the city that would exist eternally, guarded by Lord Malphas for all time.

XCII

And the land surrounding Ark, vitalized by the holy water of Larxes, endowed the people's crops with such yield as they had never seen before. Forgotten were the times of famine and deprivation, for bread and fruits covered the tables of all, from the temple to the simplest home at the edge of the city. From this time on, the seventh moon of a year would be called “First Harvest.”

XCIII

The vassals gave thanks to Malphas for his gifts and hosted a great feast in his honor at the foot of the Sun Temple. That is when the Light-Born spoke through Selna's voice for the last time: “Now you have subjugated this land. It has become your home and the thread, which spins the future of Enderal, lays in your hands. However, know that you will remain under my protection, if you continue to abide upon the path. And even if I may not be in front of your eyes, always live by my virtue.”

XCIV

After these words of the Light-Born, Selna spoke to the vassals with her own voice: “Return to this place in a moon and bring your families with you, so that we can all gather to the last person. We shall pray collectively to honor Malphas and reassure him of our faith.”

XCV

Selna began preparing the ceremony and assembled those who would build the holy order with her. She held her son in her arms and spoke to the Keepers: “Look, this is my son. He will become the first Grandmaster of the order according to Malphas' will and he shall, once the time is right, designate his successor. He is still but an infant and I will teach him everything a path-abiding Endralean should learn. The first stories he will hear will be those of our journey to this land. He shall write those down and give them to the Chronicum, once he has mastered writing, so that the holy opus may be duplicated

for all Endraleans. The holy writing will be titled 'The Path,' and so I baptize my son, the first Grandmaster of the Holy Order, Dagis, the scribe."

XCVI

Selna now assembled the Keepers every day and recited the words which would be recorded by her son and would become known as "The Path." And so it came to pass that all the members of the order were able to recite the words in their entirety, and this would continue until the end of time. The scribes of the Chronicum began to create laws based on the wisdom in Malphas' words, and they set down parables which were to serve the Endraleans as examples of how to live a path-abiding life. These writings were distributed across the land, to spread the words of the Light-Born's wisdom even to those who lived far away from the temple and Ark.

XCVII

And Selna, the first Truchessa, anticipated that the number of those who wanted to join the Holy Order would be large, yet only a few of them would be chosen. She decreed that a long period of apprenticeship would be finalized with a strict and difficult test of spirit to pick only the best and most loyal from among all the novices who wanted to become keepers.

XCVIII

During the warmest part of the summer, the great ceremony to honor Malphas was finally held, during which the Endraleans swore their eternal faith. The temple was decorated with banners depicting the sun-eye, which symbolizes the light and wisdom that Malphas emits. And a snake could be seen that was formed into a circle, symbolizing the beginning and the end, for Malphas united both in himself.

XCIX

All of Enderal appeared and gathered in front of the temple. The firmament was lit with wild, red starfire, and so the eighth moon, which ended the year with this festivity, was called "Star Summer Night." The society of path-abiding ones recited with a single, tremendous voice the holy words which Selna had spoken and which shall honor the Light-Born Malphas until the end of time:

C

"Thou art my light, my glimmer at the horizon. Thy name is my sacrament, and thy Path I will honor … in life as in death."

CI

"May your Path guide me."

The Prudent Boy and the Righteous Path

translated by high priest Adreyan Dal'Varek

Once there was a middle-aged man who lived on a modest, but comfortable farmstead with his three young boys. He was a sincere and wise man, yet he had never recovered from the early death of his wife. Having said his final goodbyes to her with dignity, she had set out on her last voyage and was now wandering the eternal paths in a new and different life. His own life, however, was bleak. Neither the sight of beautiful men and women, nor the soothing words of the priest from the village's chapel, located not far from his farmyard, could warm his heart. One night, as he was starving and sleeping with his three very young lads in his barren house, he raised his hands frantically towards Ark, where, according to the will of Malphas, the Holy Order reigns in the stony halls of the Sun Temple, caring for his followers.

"From my first steps in this world up to this very moment, I have stayed true to the path, lord! I have fulfilled my destiny, built a farmstead, and married Marga. I did what my mark demanded me to do. Yet I stand here now and I am alone. I am suffering and cannot ensure a pleasant future for my children. If only I had not come to this desolate plot of land, Marga would still be alive, and I would be the successful tailor that I always wanted to be!"

So Malphas heard the lament of the poor man. It filled him with sorrow to see one of his followers suffer, yet he decided to wait, knowing full well that this was the only true path. So the years passed by and the man raised his three boys with sternness and fatherly love, but without teaching them about the path. On their sixth birthday, he did not take them to their consecration, where they would have received their mark and their destiny as is right and proper. The oldest of the three, Luzius, was an avid reader who despite the hard work he had to carry out, had found the dusty tomes of the "path," which his father had never read to them. And he understood. He understood why his father had been granted such a grave fate, even though other paths had apparently been available. And so Luzius came to him one stormy evening in autumn and spoke the following words, which would lead the old man back once more into the protecting arms of the lord:

"Father, I see how much Mother's death still affects you. You have often asked yourself why you are living this life instead of another one. - And in response you have turned away from the path. Yet I will accept your decision, if you can answer me one question: Far away, in a land that did not follow the path and from which the gods hid their faces, there was a small village with five strong, healthy men. The society was in need of food, for they would not survive the winter without meat and wheat. And so the village elder summoned the five men to assign them their tasks. First he raised a blacksmith's hammer and asked: "We require sharp blades to defend ourselves against the wolves this winter! Who among you will smith swords for us?"

Yet not one of the men responded. Then the elder pointed at a rusty bow, which hung above the tribe's throne. "Well then, we are in need of a skilled fletcher who will craft us arrows and bows to hunt game in the steppes in order to obtain fresh meat."

Still none of the men responded. The elder sighed wistfully and eventually said: "We may survive without meat and with a little luck the wolves might spare us this winter. Yet we still need a sturdy farmer, who will sow the seeds and harvest the crops, before the leaves start to wither."

Yet still the men remained silent. Finally tears came to the old man's eyes. "What is it you want then? Explain yourselves, for without your help our village is doomed!"

"Well," one of the men said, a handsome man with thick, blonde hair and of athletic physique. "I have always known that it was my vocation to paint pictures. I feel it deep in my heart and that is exactly what I will do, and nothing else."

And so the village did not outlast the winter. This is what you have not understood, Father: the well-being and self-fulfillment of an individual does not always come first. Unity and strength will never flourish in a society where everyone follows his own will and has his own opinion. Such societies will never stand the test of time. How foolish it is for us, oh Father, to question our life night and day. We will never find any answers, for we do not possess the divinity of our lord, who is doing everything to give to us a fine life. Even when the path is difficult, we must pursue it. Not for our own good, but for the good of all."

And so the old man fell to his knees in awe towards Ark and asked Malphas for forgiveness with a penitent voice. He had realized the truth. For each creature born in these beautiful lands is entrusted with two duties. The first and foremost of which is to respect the gods and hold them in high esteem, those gracious builders of our society, who shoulder many burdens every day to grant us a pleasant life. The second but no less important task is remaining true to one's path - the pursuing of one's true destiny.

Malphas' voice chimed from the stone halls, stirred by the man's sincere grief. His words were addressed to everyone, his faithful and unfaithful children alike:

"Oh, children! Apart from your path only darkness and mourning await you. Not that I am the one punishing you, but life itself is. Do not fret if your destiny holds less rewards for you than that of a High Keeper. For in the end, oh you who keep the path, you all will set out on your last journey upon the Eternal Paths to experience the great truth."

Then he said in a benevolent voice to the man who had strayed, the father of the prudent boy:

"You shall be forgiven. Return to the Path - and I shall wait there for you."

The Records of the Wayward Wanderer

You, the reader of these lines, relentless adventurer, who has found my hideout and is holding this book right now, are to be congratulated! These are the records of the Pathless One. Not any pathless one, no, this is the writing of a true luminary: the Wayward Wanderer.

He who is, without a doubt, extolled all over Enderal even after his death in the song of the Wayward Wanderer. The followers of Malphas have done their utmost to spread this sordid song throughout the land. There is no bard who does not count it as a part of his repertoire, no commoner who has not sung it once in his lifetime at work or on his way to the market. Why should it be any different now that you have wrenched it from my decaying remains? The songs that people do not know to whom or to what they relate persist the longest. Or do you know the name of the bard who has written down this tune? I met him in person; he wrote down his notes based on my tales, which he then proceeded to rework into this caricature which you get to hear in the local tavern, whether you want to or not.

A young lad he was, ambitious and curious. He visited me in my hut in the Undercity, searching for gripping stories, as he told me. He had just returned from his journey to Nehrim. The bards there were mute, he said, and they would only play their lutes in the streets. If people wanted to listen to chanting, they had to wait until groups of musicians came from distant lands to perform in the theatre of Erothin. As he noticed the empty satchels of his colleagues there, he witnessed one of Enderal's principles regarding bards: that people not only wanted to hear music, but also stories. And he was a great listener. Before I realized it, I had told him my whole life's story and the paper was filled with his scribblings. How could I have known then that it would result in such a sorry affair? Yet it should not be surprising. Too tempting are the riches promised to those who serve Malphas' cult.

And so he did not compose an authentic ballad in the venerable manner of bards and honor, but rather wrote one that ensured him the favor of the third might, the Paladins. His name remained unknown, yet his satchel was full for the rest of his life. And me? I received alms from the storyteller, but became a real celebrity in my lifetime. My notoriety made the citizens shrink back; I was a bad example who was shown to children to keep them on the right path. The gossip about he who was foolish enough to bear his heart to the traveling bard spread fast throughout the Undercity. And it was there that the legend about the one who disdained the path which had been chosen for him originated. Every resident of this cursed quarter could have been the Wayward Wanderer, yet still was everyone willing to point out my hut for a good payment from the tourists.

The Paladins were suspicious about my infamy at first, for they were glad they had the song of the Wayward Wanderer, an easy-to-grasp, anonymous, and universal tool, which entertained and

intimidated people at the same time. The words of the lyrics were so vague, the transgressions and woes so mundane, that anyone could see themselves in them.

It turned out however, that simply my existence was a welcomed addition to the ubiquity of the song, even though no one knew any more about the Wayward Wanderer than before, after having seen my humble abode in the Undercity. People felt admonished and insecure by the warning of the ballad and thus by visiting me they could reassure themselves that it was indeed someone else's fate. To them, I became a living reminder to not become like me and to always follow the path which was determined by birth. They came in multitudes from everywhere, just to take a gander at me, who made them shudder blissfully with my failed existence, safe in the knowledge that by unquestioningly following Malphas' tenets, they were doing the right thing. Aristocratic ladies had their servants lay down cloths on the dusty roads. "That no dirt might touch my shoes. They are genuine Boddenbruuks from Nehrim!" they scolded, as they pressed their wrinkled noses against my windows to study with their own eyes the squalor that the most pathless of the pathless ones had to endure.

The children's games were not any less cruel. One could hear them the whole day: "Who strays in the void? Who strays in the void? The Wayward Wanderer, the Wayward Wanderer!" This they chanted while they poked one from their midst, whom they had blindfolded, with sticks. After a while another child, who was wearing a headdress braided of twigs, removed the pathless one's blindfold and said with the utmost magnanimity: "Come back onto Malphas' path!" The previously teased child was rewarded with the crown of twigs and the role of the paladin for the next round. They steadily approached my hut while playing this game. They wanted to prove their courage to each other by doing so. Once I got carried away and scared them away with an evil glance; they ran away screaming and giggling, only to return after a while to begin their game anew.

For a while I endured this condition. After all I only had this place, this miserable hut amidst the dirt of the Undercity. It became my refuge after countless, long journeys. No other place remained for me, for no society wanted to include someone who had lived for so many years off of the path that was intended for him. What drove me on those journeys, those wanderings? Was it a dream I was searching for in the sunset? Ridiculous! Mere tripe from the mind of the balladmonger to make a line of his song sound like something they might call poetry.

I had not searched for any dream, but for answers! Answers to all the questions which this world poses and that cannot be answered by the monotone, mumbled principles of Malphas, memorized by all the citizens of Enderal.

I have not found even a single answer, but I have found love. One of the few things the song was right about. The love of that woman was so great that she was willing to share with me my miserable life in the Undercity. But it was doomed to fail. Only sorrow and anguish remained. And something the song forgot to mention: death.

Yes, I left her. I wandered away. To spare her from the rogues and cutthroats of the Undercity who lusted for wealth they assumed she might possess. I left her, so that she might return to the bosom of her family, back to the sheltered life she had been leading before she absconded with me. Oh yes, you do not know; this is something the song has left out: She was the daughter of the rich, reputable Prince Dal'Brois, the beautiful Juliana. She brought disgrace to her family when she disappeared with a pathless one to trade her life in luxury, which she had been savoring before, for a harsh life in the Undercity. I went away. Left a message to let her know that I had ventured out to a faraway place and had no intention of returning. Wrote something of a different woman in a distant land. I wrote down everything to keep her away from this place, where a life with me could only lead to misfortune. And she went back.

Only shortly after my shameful disappearance did I return secretly to the city to see if my plan to keep Juliana away from the misfortune that living with me would lead to was working out. To see if she had found her way back to a life which offered her repose and security. A life which allowed her to raise her kids one day in an environment, which might be dishonest and decadent, but was not doomed to misery and death as was the one I could offer her in the Undercity. But I had not foreseen the depravity of the mighty. In the shrubbery of the palace garden beneath her chamber, where I was hiding, I could hear the wailing of Juliana's mother, the princess. Her husband tried to soothe her with calming words. He talked of the curse of a life in the Undercity and of the scum Juliana had decided to invite into her life. She had been murdered, surreptitiously in the night, in her own room inside the palace.

I perceived everything else like a nightmare that crept into a daze. I knew where I was heading. I knew all the corners and hideouts, the secret meeting points of the Undercity. And indeed a couple of hours later I had found the prince, hooded with a cloak, escorted by two heavily-armed guards. He had found some poor fool for his scheme. He was certain to receive his dirty payment for the assassination.

He was impaled with a sword instead. Another dead man they would find in the gutter at sunrise. And the family Dal'Brois was freed from everything that could have damaged their reputation. The family's bloodline and every branch of their pedigree would still be carried on by them whose lives occurred without a stigma on Malphas' path. Why now? Why was Juliana spared when she was still living in the Undercity with me? How could one order the death of his own flesh and blood? You. Reader of these writings, you are hopefully less gullible than I was back then. Only after a while did I recognize the prince's logic: As a pathless castaway Juliana was not a member of the family any longer, nobody had to justify himself to her. Like all of those who have had to live in the Undercity, she did not exist anymore.

No book would have ever mentioned her again, she would have disappeared from her father's annals as one of the many early deceased children in the margins. Only when she returned remorsefully to Malphas' path with a bowed head did she become a menace to the family of the prince. For centuries they had been great paragons, for only those faithful to Malphas came from this house. This tradition

was to be preserved by Prince Dal'Brois at any cost. The remorseful who returned to their path after straying once were the favorites of the order. With their shame and infamy these petty ones were the easiest to control. Not for anything in the world did the prince want this weakness in his gallant house. He wanted to be able to look the order in the eye.

It was all the same to me when my hopes to see the woman I loved from a distance were shattered. I returned to my empty hut in the Undercity and let life pass me by. I have not had any more questions for the world, yet at least the wretchedness happening all around me could not unsettle me. I was waiting for the years to pass and death to draw its circles ever closer around my home. Prince Dal'Brois did not do me the favor of sending an assassin to take my life as well. I was too irrelevant, too benign to the great house, now freed from the infamy in their midst. Not even the princess, who had truly been mourning for her daughter and who did not suspect who really was responsible for Juliana's death, would have believed me even if I had managed to approach her. I was but a pathless one.

And then came the bard. Damn it, how could I have known that this fellow would be able to get me talking like that? That is when the tranquility ceased. Gawkers. Children. Racket. First I considered yelling everything I knew, hoping that I might yet be struck down by the baron's henchmen. Bu I did not want to die in this place. I traveled for one last time, long and far, to find this cave, a place far away from everything I did not want to see or hear. And one more thing: Never have I had regrets for not following Malphas' path.

And never have I advised anyone to stay on Malphas' path. For I was never asked anyway. Nobody ever wanted to hear my advice. You, the reader of these lines, are you a disciple of Malphas? Then throw this paper into the next fireplace. Delight yourself at the sight of these lines burning in flames, which you believe to be the fire of truth.

But if perhaps you are a free spirit, someone whose thoughts do not wander on those predestined, narrow paths, then take these writings with you. Maybe you will be able to achieve more than I could with this story of my life. Find others who might want to read this and who are ready to learn from it, how putrid the threads of the mighty are which are spread across this land.

The Skinner and Wild Magic

She knew that her time had come.

Struggling to hold back her tears, she took a deep breath and knocked at the steel door. A moment thereafter, a man with a distinctive nose and thick pitch-black hair opened. Without having exchanged any words, the woman decided that she liked him. His upright posture conveyed a sense of safety while his black eyes promised wisdom and compassion. The keeper did not ask any questions - they were pointless. Countless women - and men as well - had already come before this door to confess, and this would not be an exception.

"Come in, my lady", he invited her, and pointed to a massive desk with his gloved right hand. With lowered head, she followed his request and entered. The "room of confession", as the folk saying went, was sparsely furnished. Three large windows allowed the clear moonlight to illuminate the outer end of the room, behind the desk, where she would now seat herself. To confess. A bitter taste took hold of her tongue. She never would have dared to imagine it could come to this.

"What is your name?", the keeper began the conversation when both of them were sitting, he with his back to the window, she with her back to the door.

"Smith." The woman did not look up. "Mirtha Smith."

The keeper nodded, grabbed a piece of parchment, a quill, and notated the name.

"And this is about...?"

Mirtha hesitated for a moment. It is too late. There is no going back now.

"My companion, Meron Smith."

She burst into tears, as her words faded away. At the same time, the sentences were oozing out like a slow and bitter mass.

"At first I thought it to be chance. But the evenings on which he came far too late or not at all became more and more frequent. Then I followed him."

The keeper looked at her sadly and began to take notes again.

"Which path did your husband follow?"

"Skinner. We -", her arm moved dismissively, "His family has been walking the furrier's path for countless generations, but what does that have to do with my testimony?"

"Mere formalities, my lady", he said and noted the path on his parchment.

"So you followed your husband - where did he go?" he asked, even though he had a vague idea.

"To the-", the completely hysterical woman balked, "to the Undercity. I have never seen him there, in that ghetto, this place of whores and beggars, this, this ...", she burst out, together with more tears.

"Please calm down and tell me exactly what happened there", the keeper said quietly, but determined.

At the same time, the woman's testimony confirmed his suspicion - the Undercity, thorn in the heart of the Order. A cancer in the ruins under the Upper City, growing ever larger and always lusting for more victims. Robbers, prostitutes, rascals, drug addicts, cutthroats and more - in short, all kinds of pathless scum were roving about in its dark and entwined alleys, escaping their just punishment. Though there were regular patrols and controls, until now the Order had not been able to lead all those stray lambs on the right path again. The thought hurt.

After the woman had found her composure again, she continued to speak slowly: "He beat at the door of an old, downtrodden hut right in the heart of the district. At first nothing happened. But then a cloaked figure lurked out of a window right above the door. Then Meron appeared to exchange weird passwords with a voice from behind the door and it was opened. My husband entered the hut. I waited a brief moment and approached the hut's windows."

"You have been extraordinarily brave, my lady", the keeper said, nodding approvingly - he knew all too well how hard it could be to enter the "cave of the Vatyr" in such situations.

"When I finally saw Meron again, he wore the same brown garb as that devilish gatekeeper. They formed a circle, surrounded by candles and billows of smoke throwing off a sweet, rotting smell. And then...", the young woman stammered, "then... then they brought in an unclothed girl in the room, gagged and bound at her feet and legs. She floundered and struggled, but a pockmarked brawny man knocked her down until all she did was trembling." By then tears were flowing out of her eyes in streams, heavily falling on the room's stony ground.

"And your companion stood back?", the keeper, touched by the woman's pain, asked.- He had heard to understand what she had experienced and what had happened with her husband.

"He... I don't understand it. How could he possibly do that? It just doesn't make... make any sense. Throughout his life he was path-abiding! We... he..." Her voice trailed off in the midst of the sentence and she only stared at the desk with unseeing eyes, as if her silence would undo what happened.

The keeper removed the leather gloves and put his rough, scarf-skinned hand on the woman's. "Often the path Malphas intends for us puts us before tempting junctions - and we do not always recognize them as such. The magic flowing in your companion's veins, and recently reaching his consciousness, is among the most horrible temptations."

The young woman was still sobbing, but slowly life returned to her honest eyes. The bearded warrior's touch calmed her.

"And your companion's deeds are understandable. In the right hands, magic - formed, controlled, and carefully supervised - is among the greatest gifts of Malphas to us", he leaned over to the broken woman, "without direction, however, it can corrode us from the inside out, leading us to pathlessness."

He reflected on the truth of his words. Magic truly was a gift, only granted to a few chosen ones, most notably the Aeterna. Far too many of Enderal's path-abiding people discovered a talent for magic in their youth but failed to report it to the Order like Malphas demanded, to decide if and how their talents should be used.

The young woman's fate was saddening.

He suspected that her companion had recently discovered his magical abilities and let himself be scared by one of the Undercity's ruthless soul fishers. They were irrational fears and lies, enwrought with splinters of truth concerning the Order's admission exam - required for all Endraleans with magical abilities - and how many magically talented novices did not survive it. Anyhow, this was the only possible way .

Wild mages - the name given to humans unable to control their bodies magical energies, might be able to achieve impressive powers, but such powers were akin to those of a rabid wolf - recklessly devouring his enemies, but in time inevitably directing his wrath at his master. The magic practiced in the Order more resembled the powers of a faithful warhorse - having its own will, but nonetheless functioning in harmony with its rider.

A trembling voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "You won't... kill him, right?", she whispered.

He removed his hand from hers and and based his chin on the backs of his hands. First slowly, then determined, he shook his head. "No. Each Endralean deserves an opportunity to return to the right path." Relief blinked in her sad eyes.

Of course he knew of the disastrous consequences caused by a magically poisoned mind - whether there would be a way back for her husband was uncertain at best, but he did not wish to take this glimmer of hope from her. "Malphas help us", he thought and continued the interrogation.

"But we will obviously have to intervene. If the circle you are speaking of truly abducts innocents - even if they come from the Undercity - we have to get down to the root of this evil. Should we expect him in your home, it will not take long for the other pathless ones to take note and remove each and every trace of their rituals. I therefore suggest to wait no longer - you will lead us to the scene of the crime as soon as possible."

It appeared like the young woman had regained part of her composure. She nodded and looked directly at the man. "What is your name?", she asked.

Surprised, he raised his eyebrows. "Simas. Simas Dal'Ceron."

For the first time this night she spoke with a calm voice, contradicting the desperation of her words. "Please protect him, Simas. I am begging you."

"I promise to do my utmost", the keeper said loud and clear.

The preparations were made quickly. Simas told Natara Dal'Veram, the head of the Order, of the circumstances. Though intervening in ordinary crimes or pathlessness belonged to the Order's routine tasks, the elderly warrioress granted Simas a detachment of experienced Order warriors to advance into the Undercity together with him and the young Mirtha - potentially discovering a whole group of criminal wild mages was too important to take chances. Upon arriving in the Undercity, the group did not lose time and was led directly to the suspicious hut by Mirtha. Even though she pretended to be dutiful and confident, Simas knew how torn she had to be on the inside.

Shortly before reaching the hut, Simas, the Order's warriors and Mirtha rested in a dark alley in order to plan the next steps.

"Have you noticed entrances apart from the front door when you were there?", Simas asked Mirtha.

"Not that I remember", she answered and added, more thoughtful and quiet, "but after I had to see the... gruesome deed, I ran back to the Upper City, without looking back - it is entirely possible that I oversaw something."

"You do not need to blame yourself for that. No one could expect you to remain level-headed upon witnessing such horror", Simas tried to encourage her and addressed his men: "So this is our plan: Three of you surround the hut until you are at its backside. Make sure to find possible escape routes. Two stay here with the lady and the the remaining men follow me into the lair."

"Can't I come with...", Mirtha began, though soon fell into silence. Though this operation was about Meron, she knew of the dangers and her death would not benefit anyone. It would be hard enough even without the added diversion.

"You are a clever and honest woman, Mirtha; I can understand your thoughts well - but for your sake I request that you wait here", Simas said with an understanding, but strict, look in his face.

She stared at him for some time, then one was able to hear an, "Alright, I will wait" from her, "but don't you forget your promise to me."

Simas nodded and turned to face his men: "Are your positions and the plan clear? Good, then we begin."

He and his men spread out and when the three charged with protecting the backside arrived, he gave the signal. He kicked the door in and swarmed into the hut with his men. At once fearful, but also furious screams left the hut: "How did they find us...? - No matter, we are better mages than those sons of Vaty..." The noise of battle grew louder and Mirtha could no longer understand the words.

Since Simas had left with his warriors, she had not once lifted her eyes from the door, praying. She prayed to Malphas for her husband's rescue and safety.

And then all there was silence. The Order's warriors appeared outside, together with Simas - two of them carried a lifeless body.

As she saw the body, Mirtha froze for a second before she ran towards the two men with fury. Before she reached them, Simas stopped her: "Is this your husband? Then he had incredible luck to stand next to the door, that way I was able to knock him out before the others in the hut realized what was happening. The other wild mages were not as lucky: apart from two wounded, they are all dead. One of my own, too, lost his life - may Malphas accompany him on his last path"

At once all anger left her and she felt joy: "Does that mean that Meron will be able to live a normal life?"

"Right now nothing is certain, first we will need to determine whether he will be able to restrict the wild magic within himself and become a warrior of the Order. Furthermore, he will have to answer for the murder of the young girl", Simas warned her.

"But if he weathers the Order's admission rituals and vows to stay faithful to his path in the future, he may be pardoned still - seeing how his spirit was clouded by magic.", he said with the hint of a smile.

Mirtha beamed,"I thank you with all my heart. But even more do I thank Malphas, who had mercy on my Meron, granting him the opportunity of a fresh start, even though he completely turned his back on the path."

"Malphas is like a merciful shepherd, though they may at times leave the right path, he does not abandon them, as long as they once again reassure him of their loyalty and lead a good further life.", Simas explained as they left the dark tunnel connecting Undercity and the Upper City to step in the warm light of the rising sun.

Vyn: A geographical overview

from Derrek Dal-Monag, arcanist of the second signet

Foreword

This composition is an approximation. One would be impudent to claim that he knows Vyn in all its magnitude — there are too many white spots on the maps, too many sunken exploration vessels, too many island rising and sinking back with each century from the sea.

Ergo this is a compendium of all, that different geographer, philosopher and clerics of the civilized worlds have come to an agreement about.

The civilized and the godless world

Those continents under the rule of the Light-born are referred to as the civilized world. This includes Qyra, Arazeal, Nehrim, Enderal, the belt of Kilé, and, of course, Inodan, the domicile of the gods. In each of the first five named continents rules a Light-born, whose worship defines the culture of each country. The known lands of the godless world however are the Skaragg-Islands, Melêe, since Zoras revolt Myar Aranath and since the battle of Tirmatral also Arktwend. While in the lands of the Light-born are dominated by peace and stability, the godless worlds are defined by anarchy, chaos and idol cults.

The elapsed and the red sea

The elapsed sea surrounds the continents of Myar Aranath and Arktwend, the Skaragg-Islands and the belt of Kilé. The southwest is tropical; but the rest of the sea is harsh and grey, which can be linked back to the magic contamination of Zora's war.The red sea surrounds the continents of Nehrim, Qyra, Arazael and Enderal.

Lands of the civilized world

Although the values, lifeforms and philosophy are different, the lands of the civilized world are united by the rule of the gods. All citizens of the civilized world speak Inâl and are therefore able to communicate, however, the dialects and idioms differ from land to land.

Enderal

Enderal, our home, lies northeast of Nehrim, in the red sea. It is estimated to be bigger than the belt of Kilé and Arazeal, but smaller than Nehrim or Qyra. The land of Enderal is diverse: There are heathlands, fir forests, mixed forests, fertile coastlines, but also crystallic forests and an extensive desert. The capital of Enderal is Ark, which is in the southeast of the land, build at the hillside of the King's rock. Enderal is the headquarter of the holy order and the dominion of the light-born Malphas.

The belt of Kilé

The belt of Kilé is an island chain of 77 tropical island, in total, and is located west of the Skaragg-Islands, in the clean part of the elapsed sea. The islands of Kilé are reckoned as dangerous because of the exotic fauna, yet at the same time they are rich in natural resources and spices. The capitol of the belt is Uunil-Yâar and is located on the biggest Island, the so-called Blue Island.

The Kiléans pray to the goddess Morala.

Arazeal

Arazeal lies south of Qyra and is mainly composed of velds and rocky desert. It is debated, whether Arazeal can be counted as a part of the civilized world, which can be traced back to the conflict between the wild tribes in the west and south and the civilized people in the coast towns. For those interested, the author recommends his work "The war for Arazeal". The (civilized) Arazealean worship the light-born Irlanda.

Qyra

Qyra is together with Nehrim the biggest continent of Vyn. It lies directly east of Nehrim. Three quarters of the landmass are covered by an infertile desert, in whose center lies the enormous, monolithic formation known as Asâtoron's spears. The capitol of the land is at the southeastern coast and is called Al-Rashim. Al-Rashim is deemed to be the biggest city build by human hands, so far.

The Qyranian worship the light-born Saldrin.

Nehrim

Nehrim is located in the center of Vyn and is, together with Qyra one of the two biggest continents. It is separated into three regions: the subtropical Southrealm, which is ruled by an idol cult (the Temple of the Creator) and therefore part of the godless world, the mountainous, snowy Northrealm, and the moderate Middlerealm. The light-born Erodan was worshipped in the North- and Middlerealm until his departure of this world. The Northrealm divided itself 8225 a. St. through a malicious rebellion from the Middlerealm. Since then the two realms rage war against each other, while the Southrealm completely secluded itself. The Middlerealm is under the rule of Chancellor Barateon since 8202 a. St.

Lands of the godless world

The Skaragg-Islands

The Skaragg-Islands are a connection of four big and several smaller Islands near the elapsed sea. Because of the magical contamination the Skaragg-Islands have scarce vegetation, rocky and inhospitable. The Islands are ruled by three feral tribes, which are in a constant war with each other. The matriarchy, at the top of the tribe, are the Bonereaders — witches, which claim to be in contact with the dead through wild magic.

Myar-Aranath

Myar Aranath is the homeland of the Aeterna and is located northwest of Arktwend, in the center of the elapsed sea. Even before its devastation through Zora's war, Myar Aranath was an inhospitable area, mostly consisting of mangrove forests, swamps and bogland. Since the magic contamination the air is thick and only hardly breathable, and the smell of entropical magic is all around. Myar Aranath was never in the dominion of a light-born, and since the war in 4523 a. St. most Aeterna left the land. Today it is mainly inhabited by Arp and the "children of the swamp", a primitive and brutal tribe, which is only a shadow of the advanced civilization which used to be Myar Aranath.

Arktwend/Tirmatral

Arktwend (originally Tirmatral) is an enormous continent west of Nehrim. Once an enigmatic realm under the rule of the light-born Tyr, it is since the most recent war in 8202 a. St. abandoned and is mainly inhabited by outlaws and grave robbers, living in the ruins and on the quest for fortune.